MESSENGERS OF RELIGION:

MEDIUMS AND MEDIA IN SINGAPORE'S POPULAR

RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is my original work and it has been written by me in its entirety. I have duly acknowledged all the sources of information which have been used in the thesis.

This thesis has also not been submitted for any degree in any university previously.

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Lim Eng Hui Alvin

12 December 2014

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Summary

My research follows the work of a spirit medium's assistant. Our conversations led me to understand his relationship to a spirit medium of the Monkey God. He became an important reference point—as a medium where other mediums and media converge. His use of social media to share his experiences online, his vast personal knowledge of Taoism, his memories of religious experiences, and his techniques and habits when practicing his religion provide compelling insights into how embodied practices can be studied alongside virtual practices. Our interactions began to form the spine of the thesis and we now share a space where his particular religious experience of popular Taoism in Singapore is reconstituted in my writing. Chains of signification, performativities, translations, interpretations and diversions emerged out of our different positions and they led me to consider the importance of mediumship and positionality.

At the heart of religious practices are mediums. The formation, adoption, adaptation and/or destruction of mediums make a spiritual exchange possible. An exchange between gods and their mediums, worshippers, believers and religious objects may involve only a gesture but it is also informed by various perceptions of reality. This thesis aims to explore the ways in which mediums induce changes in perception and thus re-define how religious knowledge and efficacy are produced and proliferated. More importantly, a myriad of religious mediums are constantly co-performing, co-relating and changing roles, forms, agendas and perspectives. I propose to examine mediums as traces that are not confined to a human and non-human binary. Instead, they are entangled and these converged traces are capable of bringing about an affective experience of spirituality.

The Nine Emperor Gods festival in Singapore is used as a case study to illustrate the above process, where a convergence of traditional practices and new media technology takes

place. Computer technology echoes the ancient knowledge of Taoist codes and trigrams. When combined, they preserve a newer expression of popular Taoism. Traditional practices adapt and change over time and place when technologies and techniques interplay. However, play can also be a destructive force when excessively pursued.

The case of Ku Witaya, a spirit medium who thought he could take his life and be reborn as a digital spirit, disrupts the narrative. At odds with a thesis of creativity and productiveness (that the examples of popular Taoist practices suggest), is the extreme case of performance leading to a destructive end. Ku Witaya took his life along with his best friend, Sia Chan Hong. Perhaps there is more to the concept of medium than the creative play that individuals introduce to religious practices.

In the last case study of Protestant performances, an assemblage of mediums and media, and the technological and spiritual, form what I call an interface of mediums. A popular religion's interface has the capacity to fuse forms and showcase faces—because God has no face, his messengers' faces come to the fore. As the messengers travel and carry the gods' messages, what this message will become remains a critical question.

[500 words]

Figures and Table

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14. Footpath of Priest through the temple.

Chapter 1

Religious Messengers

1.0 Introduction: Partial Truths or Fiction?

> This is why *The Teachings of Don Juan* was, for me, a thrilling experience. (It) reports a human reality, not an equivalent of that reality. That it is beautifully written is obvious. That it is *true* is perhaps equally obvious, but perhaps it is most true to the anthropologist who has concerned himself with such experiences. (Carpenter 1968, ii)

The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge (1968) was and still is a controversial work. To this day, the debate as to whether Carlos Castaneda, a graduate student in anthropology at UCLA actually met a Yaqui Indian and was taught to be a medicine man, continues to intrigue many. He was awarded a Master's degree from the University of California, Los Angeles for his first work and later, a doctorate degree for *Journey to Ixtlan: The lessons of Don Juan* (1972). In *The Don Juan papers: Further Castaneda Controversies*, Richard DeMille calls him a "brilliant fraud or that he was an incredibly careless and sloppy ethnographer in a disorganized department" (DeMille 1980, 117). DeMille's earlier book, *Castaneda's journey: The power and the allegory* reports Castaneda's irregularities in his ethnography and suggests that it is a fiction. In a more recent article, "Two forms of the outside: Castaneda, Blanchot, ontology", Casper Bruun Jensen characterised Castaneda as a "quasi-ethnographer" (Jensen 2013, 310). According to Jensen, Castaneda has lost almost all credibility within anthropology (but see Wagner, 2001; 2010, where Castaneda's influence on Roy Wagner is explicitly shown).

I will not try to analyse in the place of the young Castaneda[1]. The question for me is not whether Castaneda was a fraud or whether he did experience those five years with a medicine man, Don Juan. Instead, the question is how efficacy is achieved through a religious narrative. An application of Jacques Derrida's reading of Maurice Blanchot can help derive a perspective on religious experience when a religious practitioner attests to what is called a real experience (Derrida 2000, 92). Even if by all accounts Castaneda's writing is false through and through, or to rearticulate what Derrida would describe, it is a "case of a lie or a phantasmatic hallucination, or indeed a literary fiction pure and simple" (Derrida 2000, 91), the writing still took place. For Derrida, "the event described, the event of reference, will have taken place, even in its structure of "unexperienced" experience, as death without death…that is, through a phantasmaticity, according to a spectrality…that is its very law" (Derrida 2000, 91). Under those conditions, the spectrality or virtuality "allows what does not arrive to arrive, what one believes does not arrive to succeed in arriving" (Derrida 2000, 92). As Derrida points out, "false testimony and literary fiction can in truth still testify, at least as symptom, from the moment that the possibility of fiction has structured—but with a fracture—what is called real experience" (Derrida 2000, 92). Hence, a writing such as Castaneda's can in reality result in an experience and produce the event of reference, which later takes place in moments, and is carried out efficaciously through performance.

The objective of this dissertation is to exceed the opposition of real and unreal, actual and virtual, factual and fictional (Derrida 2000, 91) and account for the spiritual expressions and performativity of popular religious practices in Singapore as they are believed in,

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[1] This echoes the line "In his place [in the place of the young man], I will not try to analyse" which is taken from Maurice Blanchot's *The Instant of My Death* (Derrida 2000, 65). More specifically, I relate to the complex relation between the young narrator one must bear witness to in the present, and the present narrator who, according to the synthesis of which is spoken earlier, must undersign 'I' as the synthesized past and present "I" in a future writing. But in my case, I am not Castaneda, and yet this uncrossable difference is being encountered in this writing, that is, from a young Castaneda's perspective I am replacing him as the next narrator of his narrated encounter with Don Juan, in a writing that the reader is about to read a few pages later.

performed and developed into. In short, the central question is: **how do mediums and media make religion work?** 'To work' implies the performativity of the practicing or doing of religion and the labour that goes behind the doing of it. It also implies how the doing makes it (religion) work—how the immaterial is made material and how the imperceptible is made perceptible.

It is here that I must acknowledge the kindness of many who impart their knowledge to me as I observed the practices. As the writer of the next event of the reference, there is also a need for me to neutralise the un-decidability of a religious experience—to make believe the presence of spiritual beings as they possess or interact with human subjects. "Virtually, with a virtuality that can no longer be opposed to actual factuality", as Derrida says, the very first dilemma that I face as a researcher of religious practices is the impossible task of validating the authenticity of spiritual beings through writing. As part of this thesis, I have to attempt to recreate a virtual representation of my experience with religious practices. I am, in truth, testifying to the symptoms of those experiences; I become an observer of the "experience of the unexperienced" (Derrida 2000, 93) and must nevertheless refer to a religious truth as it emerges with its 'symptoms'.

Derrida's statement that "false testimony and literary fiction can in truth still testify at least as a symptom, from the moment that the possibility of fiction has structured—but with a fracture" (Derrida 2000, 92) deeply resonates with the theoretical framework of this thesis.[2] Extending this understanding of 'literary fiction' to the scriptural narratives of religious practices, the stakes are equally high when it is undecidable whether a religious narrative is a literary fiction or religious truth.

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[2] Here and elsewhere in the thesis, Jacques Derrida's readings on the relationship and interplay between language, literature, continental philosophy and subjectivity will feature prominently. More specifically, I will later extend Derrida's concept of the trace to my concept of medium, which forms the leitmotif of this thesis dissertation.

In my various exegeses of Taoist practices, for example, I have discovered that they developed out of a popular understanding of Taoist thought and the seminal teachings of Laozi, Zhuangzi and other scriptures. Taoism has developed to include an external expression of its philosophy such as ideas of *qi* (loosely translated as energy flow or force; the literal translation is "air," "gas" or "breath.") and the body as a microcosm of heaven and earth.

Taoist scriptures also teach the paths to immortality and the alchemy of the inner body. These teachings support the notion of a divine order of immortals and gods. Hence, the performance of Taoist rituals is a manifestation, an acknowledgment and an adaptation of those teachings. The rituals also relate to a worship of the gods of stars and constellations (such as the Ursa Major), heroes, and spirits of the natural world, such as the elements, mountains, seas, rivers, and animals. Popular Taoism, then, is an agglomeration of communal practices, folklore and religious beliefs historically developed. It is also a complex mixture of other popular religions, especially Buddhism. While the abstract Taoist philosophy is echoed in practice, it is also rooted in embodied tradition that is constantly evolving because it is contingent on the subjective experience of religious practitioners. This subjectivity is collectively experienced, whenever a spiritual presence needs to be established or when spiritual beings arrive at the scene. Their collective experience constitutes a spiritual practice.

I propose to move away from opposing the real with unreal, tradition with contradiction (to the tradition), actual with virtual, and factual with fictional (Derrida 2000, 90) because what truly happens is that religious practices evolve, cross boundaries and are never homogenous to begin with. What matters to practitioners and devotees is the efficacy of their rituals in performing their gods and spirits and that empowers the religious experience. A religious experience is first and foremost subjective and affective. It can be efficacious in varying degrees, and holds different meanings for different people. The important task of a

researcher, in my opinion, is to be sensitive to the performative aspects and variations that bring about those experiences.

A theoretical perspective can be formed based on a subjective experience of religion, where spiritual beings and gods are not visibly obvious to the theorist. Castaneda's experimental sensibility, as Jensen points out, "resonated with key concerns of Deleuze and Guattari" (Jensen 2013, 315) as well as mine. There are two quotations that I would like to refer to in order to explicate the chain of resonance (Castaneda, Jensen, Deleuze and Guattari) and find within my work the next resonating point and departure:

> In the course of Castaneda's books, the reader may begin to doubt the existence of the Indian Don Juan, and many other things besides. But that has no importance. So much the better if the books are a syncretism rather than an ethnographical study, and the protocol of an experiment rather than an account of an initiation. (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 153)
>
> If the experimentation with drugs has left its mark on everyone, even nonusers, it is because it changed the perceptive coordinates of space-time and introduced us to a universe of microperceptions in which becomings-molecular take over where becomings-animal leave off. Carlos Castaneda's books clearly illustrate this evolution, or rather this involution, in which the affects of a becoming-dog, for example, are succeeded by those of a becoming-molecular, microperceptions of water, air, etc. A man totters from one door to the next and disappears into thin air: "All I can tell you is that we are fluid, luminous beings made of fibers." (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 274)

"A fiber strung across borderlines constitutes a line of flight" (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 275) is an expression that can also be used to describe Castaneda's narrative as he attempts to be a crow:

> The next image was one in which don Juan had actually tossed me up, or hurled me, in a straight onward direction. I remember I "extended my winds and flew." I felt alone, cutting through the air, painfully

moving straight ahead. It was more like walking than flying. It tired my body. There was no feeling of

flowing free, no exuberance…

The last scene I remembered was three silvery birds. They radiated a shiny metallic light, almost like

stainless steel, but intense and moving and alive. I liked them. We flew together. (Castaneda 1968, 176)

"Because you were seeing as a crow sees. A bird that looks dark to us looks white to a crow… Now, try

to remember how you joined them." (Castaneda 1968, 177)

Castaneda does not remember how he joined the crow or rather, it was imperceptible to

him. Deleuze and Guattari write that "packs, or multiplicities, continually transform

themselves into each other, cross over into each other" (Castaneda 1968, 274), suggesting

that the Self is conceived as "a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities… A

fibre stretches from a human to an animal, from a human or an animal to molecules, from

molecules to particles, and so on to the imperceptible" (Castaneda 1968, 275). The error that

they warn us to "guard against is to believe that there is a kind of logical order to this string,

these crossings or transformations" (Castaneda 1968, 275).

The theme of my thesis dissertation takes on the imperceptible—spiritual beings,

transformations between human and spirit, gods, transformations between spirit possessions

and digital media, etc.—or rather, to be more precise, how the imperceptible can become

perceptible as they perform or are performed, and as they disseminate. While I agree that

there is no logical order to 'crossings or transformations', at least in the empirical sense of

observing possessions—that would require me to be possessed by a spirit!—there are

commonalities in Deleuze and Guattari's approach and Castaneda's as well that may

illuminate my research. One such commonality is the reliance on literary figures to further

their arguments. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, literary figures and characters pepper the pages:

Moby Dick, Virginia Woolf, Alexandre Dumas, to name a few. When reading *The Teachings

of Don Juan* I cannot help but refer to the *Dom Juan* of Molière, the epic poem by Lord

Byron, and *Don Giovanni*, Mozart (of which Søren Kierkegaard studied at great length to formulate his aesthetic stage). These figures change the perceptual coordinates of readers as the proper names are reiterated. Their re-tellings of experiences to alternate realities cross the thresholds of ordinary reality and readers are required to re-orientate their immediate perception of their reality. Thus, literary figures mediate readers' experience and translate them for access to a reader's interpretation. This thesis would not rely on literary figures per se to re-orientate the reader's perception of religious practices. Instead, I will introduce figures (messengers, informants, devotees, theorists, philosophers, etc.) to my re-tellings of religious practices. In a similar way as literary figures, they reconstitute our perception of spiritual reality.

Carlos Castaneda has become a reference point for many others, including myself, to pursue a newer perspective, whether it be a religious belief, a philosophical enterprise or an academic project. These transformations and crossings of perspectives (or "becomings") are part of how a discourse is formed, and will also inform the formation of the dissertation. At the heart of religious practice, I argue, are systems in place that draw from references and symbols that are lost, forgotten, modified, recalled, or imagined. To this aim, an entity is put in place to mediate the past to the present or the tradition to the current practice. More pertinently, an entity effectuates an experience. The question is: what is this entity?

This entity, I propose, is a medium. Deleuze's conception of the Self as constantly transforming and crossing describes the nature of mediums—they are not always human, nor animal, nor object. Mediums and media can be described as doors, pacts and thresholds because a religious practice's material possibility is often brought about by the presence of a medium or media. Indeed, I will bring the reader to contact points between spirits and humans, animals and humans, literary figures and gods, by forming my analysis around mediums that can be technological, philosophical and spiritual. The three fields of

expressions also form three approaches or studies that in practice, crystallise into a fluid practice of religion. The meanings and senses of religious practice are constantly being remade and re-expressed in three parts. All the objects of study in this thesis require three sorts of analytical competence and must extensively factor in the technological, philosophical and spiritual aspects of religion as that is how it practiced and performed.

The study of religion requires analysts and informants to be in the 'same boat' as Jensen puts it:

> Ontologically speaking, analysts and informants are in the same boat. Insofar as informants are seen to be engaging in processes of world-making, then the same must also hold for the ethnographic theorist. Neither can avoid contributing to the ongoing composition, reinvention, or destruction of worlds (Jensen 2012). Anthropologists, regardless of their theoretical and methodological preferences, cannot avoid becoming participants in particular forms of world building, because their descriptions and concepts are also ontological building blocks. (Jensen 2013, 312)

The "world-making" process in this dissertation can only resemble a part of a complex world-making process, refined after prolonged periods of 'reinvention', 'destruction', and 'ongoing composition'. It is necessary, as part of the reading process, to remake those worlds in writing that is always partial. More importantly, the study of religious practice must include a deep understanding of how the three parts interact and how both analysts and informants of religion are equally involved in expressing those interfaces of interactions.

Castaneda becomes an important reference in my work and haunts the chapters that follow because of how his religious ascendency was brought about by his modes of engaging

his believers and non-believers. One such possible route is the use of drugs[3] but he mainly engaged with his audience through his writings.

Castaneda disappeared from the public eye in 1973 after his first and only interview with Time magazine and he began to organise a secretive group of devotees (Marshall 2007). Through his disciples, he was still very active as he published books, mostly bestsellers, and devised Tensegrity® , a movement technique he claimed to be passed down by twenty-five generations of Toltec shamans. He set up a corporation called Cleargreen to promote it, and till today, remains an active organisation with a website called *Carlos Castaneda's Tensegrity*® :

> Cleargreen was founded in 1995 under the guidance of the students of don Juan Matus—Carlos Castaneda, Taisha Abelar, Florinda Donner-Grau and Carol Tiggs—to sponsor Tensegrity® workshops, classes and publications. Tensegrity® is an art: the modern practice of the way of being that don Juan taught his students. Don Juan was the heir to a lineage of seers or shamans that began in Mexico of ancient times, and whose goal was what he called "freedom of perception." (Cleargreen Incorporated 2014)

Other ex-disciples such as Richard Jennings, an attorney who became closely involved with Castaneda in the Nineties, and Gaby Geuter, a former travel agent, respectively told Robert Marshall of *Salon* (www.salon.com) that Tensegrity® is a movement technique that "was to be the means through which the new faith would spread" (Marshall 2007). For Marshall, the technique seems to combine elements of a rigid version of tai chi and modern dance." He further concludes that:

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[3] This dissertation does not explore the use of drugs in spirit mediumship as the practices I observed did not use them to induce trance. Nevertheless, it is important to note that drugs, in Castaneda's case, perform as mediums or routes to reach one's destination. This travel or journey motif occurs most obviously in Castaneda's *Journey to Ixtan* (1973), which was also his PhD thesis. Other forms of mediums studied in this dissertation perform a similar function to drugs, though not necessarily to induce trance but to bring about an altered corporeal state and spiritual experience.

In all likelihood the inspiration came from karate devotees Donner-Grau and Abelar, and from his

years of lessons with martial arts instructor Howard Lee. Documents found by Geuter show him

discussing a project called 'Kung Fu Sorcery' with Lee as early as 1988. The more elegant

'Tensegrity' was lifted from Buckminster Fuller, for whom it referred to a structural synergy

between tension and compression. Castaneda seems to have just liked the sound of it." (Marshall

2007)

Workshops held by Cleargreen were attended by thousands. Bruce Wagner, a member

of Castaneda's inner circle, helped to produce a series of instructional videos which are

available in DVDs and can be found on YouTube. Cleargreen continues to operate to this

day, promoting Tensegrity and Castaneda's teachings through workshops in Southern

California, Europe and Latin America.

Tensegrity® is clearly an invention with allusions to supposed shamanistic roots.

However, this thesis is not concerned with debunking the way in which Castaneda extracted

from different sources. In fact, his methods and practice as a religious medium are not unique

to him alone. When analysed alongside the work of other religious mediums, a similar

inventiveness and *methods of mediation* as those used by Castaneda can be observed. By

inventiveness I am referring to the ability to make connections and draw from a wide range of

sources to consolidate them into a religious methodology or system. Castaneda was also

capable of coining terms, which may be relevant to the discussion on the devices and

assistants of Taoist spirit mediums. One of those terms is "ally," which he defines (quoting

Don Juan) as being a power capable of transporting a man beyond the boundaries of himself.

"Allies" are jimson weed or mushrooms, within which spiritual beings can be called upon to

assist the "man of knowledge" (Castaneda 1968, 213).

Castaneda's work reveals approaches of borrowing, invention and naming, at a time when inter-disciplinary intervention and method became a prominent trend in cultural anthropology to ethnography. Castaneda's borrowing of Fuller's "Tensegrity" echoes the borrowing of other terms such as Victor Turner's liminality and Richard Schechner's use of "Phatic Theater." In Schecher's case, "Phatic Theater" is used to describe Robert Wilson's integration of therapy and theatre, whose methods and results are likened to "some shamans' performances which also use the sick in a drama of adventure while opening multiple channels of communication" (Schechner 2003, 250).

More importantly, Carlos Castaneda serves as a useful reference point in this thesis to introduce and demonstrate the importance of mediums in the production, import, export, transmission and legitimisation of religious knowledge and practice. His assemblage points augment the possibilities and limits of mediation and mediumship (writing, film, theatre, audio, video, workshop, and etc.).

To further this thesis, I argue that central to religious expression and dissemination is the careful utilisation of media to form and inform religious truths and spiritual experience. I also argue that there is no spiritual experience without mediation, and that it is a reason why a religious experience might seem to be partial—because of the medium that filters the experience.

Perhaps aware of the controversies that anthropology has raised throughout the Sixties and Seventies, James Clifford wrote in *Writing Culture* that "[e]thnographic truths are thus inherently partial—committed and incomplete" (Clifford 2011a, 7). I must accept that my work is always incomplete. Despite that, there is value in pursuing a thesis around the ways in which religious practitioners articulate and form their practices through their bodies, durational performances, objects, figures and images. In short, while the dissertation cannot possibly cover every aspect of religion, it can provide a keen understanding of mediums, with

a broad focus on how they are encountered, used, and how they affect the rituals, rites and expressions of religion.

1.1 Thesis Statements

There is a need for the study of religious practices to engage their mediums in order to encounter, analyse and form a reasonable discourse around the practice, proliferation and expression of a religion. With this in mind, the following are my hypotheses as I embark on my journey through the various religious practices covered in this dissertation:

1. Mediums constitute our everyday encounter with spirits, without which no relation can be established with a spiritual being. For example, the spirit mediums described in this dissertation, who are themselves vessels of spiritual beings, simultaneously use other objects to act as spiritual vessels as well.

2. Mediums direct, transform, alter, and entangle other mediums, representations, forms and signs. They interact with each other, and these interactions are able to convey a message and at the same time alter it.

3. Mediums are also traces. One of the reasons why a study on religions is a partial account of reality is because mediums draw on mnemonic reserves, memory, tradition, including patterned movements made and remembered by bodies (Roach 1996, 26); they perform a genealogy.

Certain performances covered in the dissertation have undergone or will undergo changes over time. Inevitably, performances of mediums "carry within them the memory of otherwise forgotten substitutions—those that are rejected and, even more invisibly, those that have succeeded" (Roach 1996, 5). With regard to "Circum-atlantic performances" and the

migration of traditions, Roach's idea of "displaced transmission" that "constitutes the adaptation of historic practices to changing conditions, in which popular behaviours are resituated in new locales" (Roach 1996, 28) can productively describe the traces of Taoist and Christian practices in Singapore. In what is a more refined explanation of Richard Schechner's term "restored behaviour," Roach writes that "the paradox of the restoration of behaviour resides in the phenomenon of repetition itself: no action or sequence of actions may be performed exactly the same way twice; they must be reinvented or recreated at each appearance" (Roach 1996, 29).

The third hypothesis is a crucial one because of the ways in which mediums re-transmit and re-invent religious traditions and reflect a historical contingency within the Singapore context. Similar to Joseph Roach's agenda, I emphasise the intercultural communication between cultural forms and definitions. Through their interaction, these make "visible the play of difference and identity with the larger ensemble of relations" (Roach 1996, 4). Extending on Roach's "displaced transmission," I suggest an added emphasis on the displacements or replacements of religious practices onto the digital display, further offering another intermediary and level of intervention.

Mobilised as traces, mediums do more than just perform a spiritual function, such as being possessed by spiritual entities. Instead, they open up a series of related questions on the theatrical nature of religion: How do mediums manifest spirits and gods? When possessed, what functions and roles do they play and how are they performatively realised? How do they encourage, initiate or make possible participation in a religious practice? As a collective, what acts and actions evoke the collective and contribute to the religious experience? To reiterate the question, I propose a fourth hypothesis:

4. Mediums intervene as intermediaries in a theatrical form or "lived theatre."

I choose to describe religious practices as "lived theatre" because of its connotations—on one hand, it denotes the lived experience and what a religious practice means to an individual or community. On the other hand, it suggests religious practice as "theatrical" which the *Oxford English Dictionary* indicates as "exaggerated and excessively dramatic" (Oxford English 2nd Edition). Here, I would like to pursue a third meaning of "theatre" which, as the Greek verb *theasthai* puts forward, is "to behold"—to look at and observe the "lived theatre" as it is lived, manifesting and emerging before a participant; to contemplate and gaze at a medium till I grasp some significance of that someone or something.

As a verb, theatre derives perpetual action and a myriad number of possible scenes as they unfold, moment after moment between labour and rest. To behold (*ershauen*) this theatre over time is, borrowing from Edmund Husserl's *The Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness*, to "advance in continuous modifications, and in this process the mode of running off is constantly modified, that is, along the continuity of running off of the temporal points concerned" (Husserl 1964, 50). However, I am inclined to modify Husserl's "downward" movement of his "new now changed to the past" to a continuum or web of theatre and performance, where repetition extends a religious practice to other sites (including online sites) and scenes and has the potential to modify the existing practice.

These meanings and positions are indicative of my disparate attitudes towards the religious practices I study as a foreign observer who must often perform multiple roles: ethnographer, writer, participant, sometimes even devotee (in my case, I have to negotiate my positionality as a Christian observing other Christian practices and churches). French surrealist writer, Michel Leiris provides a pertinent description of this collapsed meaning of "lived theatre" when he writes, "Lived by the actor (who has no difficulty, as we say, getting into the role, encouraged as he is by the ambiance and by his own belief in the *zâr* as a real spirit normally manifesting itself through possession), this strange brand of theatre which can

never confess its theatrical nature is lived, equally, by the spectator" (Leiris 1986 [1958], 116). The spectator is "put on the spot" and participates and lives it with the "actor." There is an "osmosis between actors and audience" (Leiris 1986 [1958], 117) when participation is anticipated. Even though Leiris is describing his experiences of his expedition led by Marcel Griaule to Dakar and Djibouti from 1931 to 1933, connections can be made between his work and mine. Leiris's work, which included the stealing of cult items and sacred objects such as masks relates the possibilities of a false possession or acted theatre, and the re-enactment of a practice from its original context.[4] Nevertheless, the participants are invested in the performance for various reasons. Leiris further concludes that "it seems we are touching on what gives magic such great force despite the denials continually inflicted by experience: the affective elements mobilized, with their stock of myths and images as well as the share of drama and performance they contain" (Leiris 1986 [1958], 117).

A theatre perspective views religious practices as "lived theatre" where traces are formed, reengaged and restored in a "theatre where the person, is completely engaged and even in some degree able to invent for itself the scenes whose protagonist it becomes" (Leiris 1986 [1958], 117). There is much to be learned about a religious practice besides spirit possessions, whether authentic or inauthentic, in the ways in which it creates an affective experience or brings about efficacy in its rituals. This affective experience is not confined to an intense and committed observation of rituals on the part of devotees—the Taoist practices observed in my case studies will show that there might even be occasions where the devotees are free to relax and casually stand or sit at one side, taking photographs of or recording the ritual. My research includes those personal archiving practices that do not undermine the intensity of the spiritual practice. What excites me is the idea of profanation, "Ce qui me

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[4] In Leiris's case, it would be smuggling of the sacred masks and objects of the *zâr* cult to European museums as objects of art.

pousse quant à moi, c'est l'idée de la profanation" (Leiris 1981, 84). The products of those

profane acts of religion, and the role that mediums and media play in them are important to

explore. Though my research is a study of religious practices' theatricality and

performativity, it is also a study of the mundane religious practices as they are lived,

excessively mediated (recalling the Oxford definition of 'theatrical') and reperformed in

another place and time.

Calling my study of popular religious practices 'theatre' or 'theatrical' has its

disadvantages of course. Because for some, the 'theatrical' still connotes a kind of prejudice

against religion as theatre, as acted theatre, as show or spectacle, but when spiritual theatre is

at its height of its staging, the experience it brings about often affect one's senses—it is

indeed sacred and one is caught in a maze of interactions.

Rustom Bharucha (2014) argues that 'theatre' still haunts the field of performance

studies and catalyse new reiterations of its meaning and theatre' vocabulary, more than the

conventional understanding of theatre as a building or performance form. When discussing

the interrelationship between theatre, performance and performativity, he writes:

> …it is worth keeping in mind Giorgio Agamben's (2009) deeply insightful reminder on what constitutes
> the 'contemporary'. For Agamben, the twist in the argument is that only those who perceive 'the indices
> and signature of the archaic in the most modern and recent can be contemporary'. If there is a 'secret
> affinity' between 'the archaic and the modern', it is not because 'archaic forms' like theatre continue to
> exercise a 'particular charm' on the present; rather, 'the key to the modern is hidden in the immemorial
> and the prehistoric'. Contemporariness cannot be reduced to a singular relationship 'with one's own
> time'; on the contrary, the contemporary is more meaningfully grasped through a 'relationship with time
> that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism' (Bharucha 2014, 22).

> Theatre's vocabulary of 'entrances', 'exits', 'presence', 'energy', 'conflict', 'transformation', and
> 'repetition' continues to haunt and catalyse new manifestations of these words. The paradox is that when
> one least expects it, theatre is always already there (Bharucha 2014, 24).

But theatre is not always there. It is beyond the Greek amphitheatre where the mountains form the backdrop; it is veiled behind the curtains where the tabernacle resides. Theatre has its backstage where binary codes interact, or when it is automated by an unseen mechanism. Much of theatre is also about the unseen; its absence is as performative as its presence. But its veiling captures one's attention, grips one so intensely that a degree of faith is needed to believe that the unseen is the substance of one's belief, that behind the cave entrance, the body of Christ stood up and was transfigured. Theatre not being there compels us to respond. To repeat Michel Serres (1995b) when he talks about the multiple as the object of his book, Genesis: Theatre is not there when there are "objects that I seem to live through more than view" (Serres 1995b, 7). We are immersed in theatre just as the objects or mediums cause us to be immersed in theatre.

This thesis is only possible because of the experience of the multiple, of crossing boundaries and blurring relations, of dialogues both real and imagined, and of fiction and testimony. The knowledge that will be progressed here is not declarative. It is an account of the experience of not knowing something fully, and despite that apparent outcome, it is my hope that the reader will recognise the importance of the detours, connections, and disconnections, between the supposed binaries of east/west, practitioner and theorist, Jacques Derrida and Uncle Cheong, Monkey and Boy, real and virtual, and the ambiguous usage of the term medium in the coming chapters. In fact, it is because of this that I sometimes struggled with the subject and object distinction in my sentence construction: Do I write, God possessed the spirit medium? Or do I write, the spirit medium is possessed by the god? Or do I simply write, a spirit possession has occurred.

The necessary theatre that the reader will soon read about is conceived in light of the uncertainty of the numinous and yet if we must take them seriously, because we are always confronting them and they may surprise, shock, terrify or bless you, with irrevocable effects.

As Giorgio Agamben (2011a) has eloquently shown in his book, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, glory, providence and the ceremonial, liturgical, and acclamatory aspects of the Christian Church have to be taken seriously, in relation to modern democracies and new media, because they remain as relevant to us as they were in the past. However, analysing the performativity of the ceremony and glory within a Western theological genealogy is always going to be only part of the equation. Media is conceived differently here in this part of the world, and the consent given to media to participate in the ceremonial, liturgical, and acclamatory aspects of a range of synthesized popular religions functions in many surprising and different ways, as compared to those described by Agamben. The objective, thus, is to add to the existing conversation that takes seriously the performative significance of integrated components of religious practices that cross over from the secular to the sacred and vice versa, but in a selected range of contexts.

The approach that I would truly like to bring into the fold is how one can fuse theatre studies with ethnography, continental philosophy, archaic Chinese philosophy, mathematics, and technology and new media. Despite those non-proportional attributes of the writing enterprise, there is still a constant. And that is the role that a medium plays in the theatre of lived experiences; where theatricality is a medium that articulate notions of spirituality and where a medium is a trace. There is a sense of unfolding, or persisting to unfold, even if the medium changes or the roles alternate between object, spirit, subject, and human. So while I am addressing various disciplines, the heart of this thesis is theatre—theatre and its double, theatre and its entrances and exits, role-playings, false starts, sudden twists and quick resolutions of plots, either by design or accident, involving deus ex machina, imagined figures, and definition of terms.

1.2 Definition of Terms

1.2.1 Messengers: Mediums, Media and Mediation

> A complex medium containing surprising and unforeseen developments demands complex procedures and defies analysis on the basis of rules which have been set up in advance and without regard to the ever-changing conditions of history. (Feyerabend 2010, 2)

A medium (*pl. media or mediums*) can mean (among other things) "an agency or means of doing something" or "the intervening substance through which sensory impressions are conveyed or physical forces are transmitted" (Oxford English 2nd Edition). It originally denoted something intermediate in nature or degree, and literally means 'middle' in Latin. More recently, it has come to mean "a particular form of storage material for computer files, such as magnetic tape or discs" (OED). In the course of the dissertation, a spectrum of mediums and their meanings will be discussed and repeats my earlier emphasis on the three parts of religious expressions (technological, philosophical and spiritual):

1. Spirit Medium (human)—human individuals who claim to be able to interact and communicate with spiritual beings; they can be possessed by spirits and gods or assist in the possession; or individuals who evoke the image of a god or spirit through their practices.

2. Spirit Medium (non-human)—objects that are used during rituals and rites that directly or indirectly communicate a spiritual presence.

3. Digital Medium—digital cameras, digital recorder, online television, YouTube videos, websites, computers files, online games.

I may have categorised these mediums into three forms but they do not appear in isolation. Very often, they interact and merge, such as a digital camera recording a spirit medium, who is possessed by a spirit, and the digital trace is reproduced online for a new audience.

> In the same way, do Angels—as workers or operators of the universe—construct God in his Oneness? Like your fluxes, they move, they run, they fly, in a flurry of wings, music and good news, to announce the glory of the One.
>
> And in this way huge message-bearing systems are created. Systems which are characterized by a circulation of messengers—bearers of messages which can be understood. (Serres 1995a, 30)

The 'circulation of messengers' is crucial to the overall framework of the dissertation. Mediums circulate, never in isolation, and are always understood, at least to the community of religious believers. The title of the dissertation is borrowed from Michel Serres's book *Angels: A Modern Myth* where he calls Angels messengers, which could equally mean any bearer of messages. In order for the messages to be understood, levels of circulation are formed within networks and systems that bear the messages. But Serres's Pantope goes on:

> If winds, currents, glaciers, volcanoes, etc., carry subtle messages that are so difficult to read that it takes us absolutely ages trying to decipher them, wouldn't it be appropriate to call them intelligent? What human could ever presume to speak a language that was so precise, refined and exquisitely coded? (Serres 1995a, 30)

I cannot presume to speak a precise language or decode messages that have been exquisitely coded. However, what is expressed in Serres's passage is the juxtaposition of different messengers—one being the supposed intelligent messages that are decipherable by humans, the other being the carriers of subtle messages that are so difficult to read. This is where I position my dissertation: within different techniques and technologies where

religious codes interact. Some remain imperceptible, others become perceptible as they are performed through messengers. In other words, as each medium mediates a message, the message can travel in different directions, to more destinations than one, and in travelling, alter. There can be no messengers (or mediums) without mediation. In that sense, I focus on mediation as performance that merges and juxtaposes different technologies: human performance, machine performance, the religious practitioner's craft, and digital technology, among others. I am quoting Philip Auslander here who understands performance as a technology, in two senses of the word. First, performance refers to a "practice" and second, as field of study, it broadly refers to the "practical arts of performance." Mediation, for Auslander, means (among other things) "the state or fact of serving as an intermediate agent, a means of action, or a medium of transmission" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd edn) (Auslander 2008, 115).

I situate my study in a cross-section between religious technology and religious performance and what has emerged in my research is how religion is practiced and is constantly in a state of transmission and transformation. Thus, it is essential that I find the theoretical resources from existing fields of studies that engage with performance, technology and religion.

1.3   Theoretical Perspectives

There are generally two fields that this thesis dissertation crosses and can participate in: the first being Performance Studies and the second being Religious Studies, but more specifically within that field there is what is now commonly called "online religion" or "religion online".[5]

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[5] However, it must be noted that the two forms of religious activities online cannot be understood as two absolute end points. In a study about online religion as lived religion, Christopher Helland (2005) follows Glenn Young's argument and writes that, "Young recognises that an absolute distinction between online religion

1.3.1   Literature Review and Intersections: Performance Studies, Religious Studies and New Media

Richard Schechner can be seen in *Performance Theory* juxtaposing rituals and shamans with theatre and performance. In describing "Actuals," he writes:

> *Religious transcendental experience.* Mysticism, shamanism, messianism, psychedelics, epiphanies. Zen, yoga, and other ways to truth though participation or formulation as in macrobiotics, yoga, and mantra-chanting. Eschatological yearnings: what is the meaning of life? Make all experience meaningful. Sacralize everyday life. Sung poetry, encounter groups, experimental theatre, marathons, T-groups, performances made in and by communities, tribalism, rock festivals, drugs, trips, freak-outs, ecstasies. (Schechner 2003, 32)

By grouping these activities within a general framework of "wholeness," Schechner thinks that "[w]holeness, process and organic growth, concreteness, and religious transcendental experience are fundamental to many oral-based tribal cultures." While these terms can differ from culture to culture, he remarks that "there are links joining us and them. These links, or metaphors, are strongest and clearest between what we call art, particularly new theater, and what they call by names ranging from play to dancing to doing" (Schechner 2003, 32).

The above reveals the ease in which theatre, ritual, shamanism and "metaphors" as he calls it, can be linked together. Though I agree that there is a fair amount of creative conditioning in the practice of religion, it remains problematic to group every imaginable practice as relatable to religious ritual and as performance. More crucially, religious

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(where people are allowed the opportunity to participate in religious activity), and religion online (where people are given information about religion) may not be the best interpretation of religious interaction at websites (Helland 2005, 2). In a similar vein, Helland, Young and Douglas Cowan (2005) argue that websites that provide either religion online or online religion are bridging the gap between the two and offer both (Helland 2005, 2; See also Young 2004, 94).

experience is understood by Schechner as transcendental. However, there is something untranslatable about *religious transcendental experience*. For Diana Taylor, "performance also has a history of untranslatability" (Taylor 2003, 6) but it can be equally said that the history of translatability of transcendence is what makes it untranslatable and culturally revealing. By pairing religion with performance, transcendence with religious experience, neither gives us access and insight into human and spiritual experience. Instead, it undermines the ritual process that creates fragmentary by-products and traces of religion, which are immediately affective, and effectively and creatively performative.

Taylor correctly summarises that "one of the problems in using performance, and its misleading cognates performative and performativity, comes from the extraordinarily broad range of behaviors it covers…" (Taylor 2003, 6). A more nuanced and precise adaptation of 'performance' is needed to refer to the agency of a variety of mediums and the idiosyncratic nature of religious experience. Taylor earlier points out that "[p]erformance studies, due to its historical development, reflects the 1960s conjunction of anthropology, theatre studies, and the visual arts. It also reflects a predominantly English-speaking, First World positioning" (Taylor 2003, xvii). Similarly, Marvin Carlson traces the debt that performance studies in the United States today owes to social sciences, anthropology and sociology of the 1960s and 1970s. The writings of Richard Schechner, anthropologists such as Victor Turner and Dwight Conquergood, and the sociologist Erving Goffman are all influential in the development of performance studies (Carlson 2004, 1). At the same time, these various human activities are often "lumped under" the term "performance" (Hymes 1975, 13). Whatever the convergence of social phenomena is, many scholars see the value of analysing and speaking of a certain kind of activity discovered within a culture, set apart from other activities by space, time, attitude, or all three, as performance (Carlson 2004, 13). The sum total of various discrete events can then be later grouped together as a culture. The term "cultural performance"

coined by Milton Singer, encapsulates this approach. Singer suggests that cultural performances and discrete events (his example being South Asia) could be shown to the participants themselves and others, and they are the "most concrete observable units of the cultural structure." Singer's list of such events includes theatre, dance, religious festivals and weddings and so on. To him, all these performances have distinct features: a limited time span, a beginning and an end, an organized program of activity, a set of performers, an audience, and a place and occasion of performance (Singer 1959, xiii). Although this approach reveals primarily Western categories of drama, it nevertheless shaped the role of performance analysis in cultural studies from the 1970s and onwards.

However, as Diana Taylor reminds us, there is "nothing inherently Western" in the methodology of performance studies. In fact, she believes that "the methodology we associate with performance studies can and should be revised constantly through engagement with other regional, political and linguistic realities" (Taylor 2003, xviii). The difference in approaches between performance studies and other disciplines is that whatever is being studied is regarded as "practices, events and behaviours, not as objects or things" (Schechner 2007, 2). Interestingly, to Richard Schechner, the quality of "liveness"—even when dealing with media or archival materials—is at the heart of performance studies.

The 21st century, however, poses a challenge to such an approach of studying the "quality of liveness" and the supposed limited time span of 'liveness'. First and foremost, new media and social technology re-define what it means to participate (in an event) and naturally it also redefines what an event means. Taylor's reminder to constantly revise our methodologies must take into account virtual realities as much as the realities of religious practices. This research is concerned with the virtual reality of religion as much as the embodied practices of religion in Singapore. It has two objectives. First, it aims to contribute to the recent developments in the field of religious studies and new media. Scholarship such

as *When Religion Meets New Media* (Heidi A. Campbell 2010), *Religion Online* (Eds. Lorne L. Dawson, Douglas E. Cowan 2013) *Religion and Cyberspace* (Eds. Morten T. Højsgaard and Margit Warburg 2005) and *Give Me That Online Religion* (Brenda E. Brasher 2004) are all excellent examples of this emerging trend. *Mediating Piety: Technology and Religion in Contemporary Asia* edited by Francis Khek (2009) brings us closer to the region but it must be said that the field of digital humanities and media studies of religion are still not theoretically thought through in Asia.

Religion Online, for example, adopts a comprehensive survey of various representations of religions online. Essays are dedicated to describing the communities of these online portals. An article in that book, however, caught my attention. Stephen D. O'Leary, in his "Cyberspace as Scared Space," warns his readers not to dismiss rituals in cyberspace as unreal. He makes that claim as he observes that "conventional ethnographic approaches assume that physical presence is prerequisite to study and cultural interaction; in short, that there is no substitute for fieldwork" (O'Leary 2004, 47). Instead of assuming pre-emptively that the loss of physical presence produces a ritual that is unreal or "empty," the research's second objective is also to discover "what ritual gains in the virtual environment and what meanings the participants are able to derive from these practices, such that they will gather again and again to perform cyber-rituals together while paying a premium fee for their connect time" (O'Leary 2004, 47). In fact, I may add "non-live" or "video on demand" to this list. There is value in cyber-rituals because of their availability, accessibility, and repetition. But most of all, cyberspace empowers the participant with a false ownership of the online materials, and indeed the ritual, because by paying a fee or by clicking the button to play, they have first-hand access to repeatable sermons, videos, spirit possessions and daily devotions within the comfort of their homes. In actual fact, participants do not and cannot own those materials but merely store them as copies in their computers or storage spaces.

1.3.2 Religion as Practice

Religion can illustrate how embodiment is understood in relation to technology because there are qualities in religious practices, especially popular religion, that illuminate the interventions and disruptions that mediums (including those that were once not part of the religious practice) bring about when introduced to a human practice. Moreover, I have observed that there is no embodiment without the mediation by more than one party or entity. My approach brings to bear the various tensions and negotiations when different *beings* inter-relate: spirits and humans, the material and the immaterial.

To some degree, my research approach draws from Victor Turner's emphasis on studying cultural performances. In his later work, he argues that "experience always seeks its 'best,' i.e. most aesthetic expression in performance—the vital communication of its present essence … Cultures, I hold are better compared through their rituals, theaters, tales, ballads, epics, operas than through their habits" (Turner 1982, 13). However, I am cautious of reducing ritual to performance. Jean DeBernardi, who also drew much of her research methodology on that proposed by Turner, describes ritual as a "theatrical medium." For her, "sacred theatre, unlike secular theater is powerful and transformative" (DeBernardi 1995, 152). For example, she surmises that "the personality of a god replaces that of the human spirit medium." Further, "[r]itual performance reminds the audience that it is spirit that infuses matter with life force and makes contact possible with that vitalizing force." Those kinds of descriptions evoke the understanding of the meaning of ritual symbols based on an investigation of "(1) the meanings cultural virtuosi provide in exegesis, (2) their meanings in use within a ritual performance (operational meaning), and (3) their meanings in relation to other symbols within a totality" (DeBernardi 1995, 151).

There are three ways by which my approach to studying religious rituals differs from those proposed by DeBernardi and Turner. First, while I acknowledge that there can be a totality within which meanings are formed and that rituals attempt to manifest the totality, the manifestation is only done so in part. It is almost impossible for a given religious ritual to fully represent such a totality, if there were one to begin with. As mentioned, in my observations of popular Taoist practices, it is often noted that the practice differs from Taoist philosophical teachings, and it is partly because of differences in practitioners' interpretation of Taoism and the disruptions that arise during performance and its preparation. There is almost always some loss of meaning, mistranslation, misinterpretation and misperformance and they occur during religious expression. In return, new meanings, translations and reinterpretations arise through practice. During spirit possession, for example, the personality of a god replacing that of the human spirit medium is only one small aspect of the ritual; it is still the human who bleeds when he pierces his skin with a sharp object. In other words, the god is also implicated by the body that is possessed, a process that requires further exposition (see chapter 3). In my opinion, it is more productive to analyse the material consequence when abstract religious knowledge is reconceived in and through practice than the neat and carefully marked out categories of religious performance and knowledge.

Therefore, it is 'practice' that I am most keen to use throughout my work instead of 'performance.' The latter suggests an end-product but the former describes a habitual and regular reproduction of symbols with the potential to reinterpret old forms and introduce new ones. It is also worth noting again that I am not exactly referring to "restored behaviour" as coined by Richard Schechner:

> The habits, rituals, and routines of life are restored behaviors… These strips of behaviors can be rearranged or reconstructed; they are independent of the causal systems (personal, social, political, technological, etc.) that brought them into existence… The original "truth" or "source" of the behaviour

may not be known, or may be lost, ignored, or contradicted – even while that truth or source is being

honoured. How the strips of behaviour were made, found, or developed may be unknown or concealed;

elaborated; distorted by myth and tradition. (Schechner 2007, 34)

Even in a supposed restoration of a religious practice, traditions are often abandoned,

renewed, reimagined and when a practice is restored, it is never quite practiced the same way

it was in the past. I argue that this is because behaviours can never be independent of "causal

systems." Whether at the personal or collective level, practice is formed through the constant

negotiation between restoration and progression. In other words, practice updates precisely

because it addresses the causal systems at work. At a very practical level, I do not focus on a

supposed pre-expressivity of a religious behaviour but the expressivity of the ritual in relation

to both the material (e.g. the human body and objects) and the immaterial (spiritual forces,

addressees and actors).

Second, "spirit" in the Taoist context can mean numerous things, types and ideas. Thus,

for the purposes of this discourse, I shall consider "spirit" as a symbol in general. Spirit need

not refer to a higher being or supernatural force nor should it be dismissed as a fictive

component of human activity. It is to be certain an active agent in the practices I cover in this

dissertation. Once spirit is understood as a symbol and metaphor of something other than the

material mediums embodying spiritual beings (somewhat similar to actors embodying

abstract characters and ideas on stage), symbols evoked during rituals can be defined as fluid

and constantly updated; they are traces. To call something a symbol is to understand ritual as

an engagement and disengagement with traces—at once symbolising something with a

supposed origin such as a myth, and simultaneously referring to something more topical and

present to the participants of the ritual. In other words, I look at rituals as a medium that

never ceases to reproduce symbols because a priori it entangles traces of religious

expressions and reproduces them for a more present audience and context. This discussion of

"spirit" is important in understanding the Taoist body because any form of understanding of "spirit" has immediate and material implications to the body—how it behaves in a religious context or outside this context. Furthermore, "spirit" can refer to a human being's own spiritual essence and the spiritual beings that are believed to be all around us that may manifest themselves through physical means.

Last, I am also mindful of the fact that we cannot assume all Taoist practices to be authentic and constitute a direct interaction with the spirits, as mentioned earlier when I discussed Castaneda and Leiris. I was told by the senior members of the *Huaguoshangong* (花菓山宮) temple of possible cases of deceit, where a spirit medium is not actually possessed by a deity. Those spirit mediums are usually new and young mediums. This scepticism may be valid, given that the spirit medium of the temple whom I am focusing on in the next two chapters is 80 years old and is deemed to have more authority in spiritual possession than other spirit mediums; he also claims to be able to tell whether one is possessed by a god or not. This calls into question the nature and function of communal Taoist possession rituals in general. As Seligman, Weller, Puett and Simon point out, "ritual involves a certain kind of shared 'deceit' or 'self-deception'" (Seligman et al. 2008, 64). According to them, "one has the flexibility not to insist on the morally correct need to establish once and for all if there is or if there is not a" [insert a god, spirit or supernatural being]. Of course, this is only one way to look at ritual. It is nonetheless a useful consideration because the analysis can focus on how "organised deceit … temporally stabilizes the flux and unpredictability of the world" (Seligman et al. 2008, 64) or more specifically how a Taoist possession ritual secures the temporary relationship between god and human, and in that relationship determines the symbolic terms and action, which can either be predetermined as rules or as an immediate reaction to the appearance of a performing deity.

In short, the study of popular religious practices must include their misperformances and shifts from supposedly established ritual forms. These misperformances can give rise to transformative or destructive variations of the original form. A given ritual, as Seligman, Weller, Puett and Simon write, often has "changes in relation to shifts in historical pressures and cultural concerns" (Seligman et al. 2008, 66). When I mentioned that I have to be cautious in calling ritual a cultural performance, I also meant that one must avoid the connotation of 'performance' as a successful enterprise or a successful staging of a religious belief, myth or interpretation. Performance, as I understand it, does not only have to be creative and entrepreneurial. It should also include forces and acts that disintegrate the formalised structures of a former performative expression, and reintegrate the resulting traces into a different form. That said, there are also cases such as the Ku Witaya's case in Chapter 4 that illustrate the destructive nature of this reintegration of traces, with no productive aim. There is also something more than meets the eye in religion and I avoid making observations of only the visual aspects of rituals or over-determining an observed ritual as representative of all expressions of popular Taoist practice in Singapore. There is also the challenge of expressing what a destructive and performative act is and can be.

Like DeBernardi, who remains an important figure in the field of popular Taoist practices in Southeast Asia, I refer extensively to religious symbols when I analyse Taoist rituals. But once symbols are understood as traces, they mean different things to me at different times, and very often I am at the mercy of the spirit medium, the medium's assistants and the devotees present at the rituals to help me to make sense of the ritual and its meaning to its audiences. Therefore, I propose to diagnose the Taoist body in Singapore by engaging in the spirit possession rite as an outside observer as well as constantly refer to Uncle Cheong, my primary informant as the source of clarification. As an outsider observer, I am also mindful of the larger philosophical and cosmological principles of Taoism and I shall

reflect on my readings and attempt to match them with my experience and others'

experiences, so as to find possible connections and disconnections. I shall examine the extent

in which the symbols and metaphors already existing in Taoist scriptures and teachings are

fruitful to the discussion of Taoist ritual and how spiritual healing is conceived. This will

include the extent to which the reference points are evoked and lost, and where symbols lose

their meanings in the course of performing a ritual. In place, or rather, in contention with the

religious symbols could be other metaphors, truth expressions and practices that negotiate or

contest with the religious. In other words, the supposed totality of a ritual is not in the

continuum or sum of many religious parts and ideas that are traceable and understandable.

Instead, a totality includes lost practices, abandoned forms, transformed protocols, and

immediate reactions to the environment by which rituals take root and transform, even as

they reproduce a supposed religious essence. A spiritual possession ritual is a medium par

excellence—it never ceases to mediate a trace to form another trace but in the course of

mediation, what is explicitly at work are bodies. They are bodies at tension, at attention, and

in perspiration and rest; they can be inanimate or animate, involved or uninvolved, present

and absent. More crucially, when a spiritual possession ritual is practiced and mediated

through new media, questions of mediation and remediation surface.

1.3.3   Practice as Mediated

In *Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan (1964) comments that "the 'content' of any

medium is always another medium. The content of writing is speech, just as the written word

is the content of print, and print is the content of telegraph" (McLuhan 1964, 23-24). Jay

David Bolter and Richard Grusin suggest that McLuhan's examples are "problematic" and

states that he "was not thinking of simple repurposing, but perhaps of a more complex kind of

borrowing in which one medium is itself incorporated or represented in another medium." They define the "representation of one medium in another remediation. Furthermore, Bolter and Grusin argue that "remediation is a defining characteristic of the new digital media" (Bolter and Grusin 2000, 45). However, I maintain that McLuhan's remark is "problematic" not because of the complex repurposing of one messenger to another, but the suggestion that there is a logical trajectory in the remediation: before writing there is speech, before print is the written word, and etc. Indeed, there is always remediation, but McLuhan's definition fails to lose the logocentricism apparent in it and that has also crept into Bolter and Grusin's definition.

1.3.3.1 "Beholding" Mediated Religious Practice

> [W]e no longer know whether what was always presented as a derived and modified re-presentation of simple presentation, as "supplement," "sign," "writing," or "trace," "is" not, in a necessarily, but newly ahistorical sense, "older" than presence and the system of truth, older than "history." (Derrida 1973, 103)

As opposed to Husserlian phenomenology—which is to comprehend things by intuitions or presentations—Derrida argues that "the thing itself always escapes" and "the look cannot abide" (Derrida 1973, 104) but I would like to provide a way to restore "the look" of the "thing," or in other words, to find a way to comprehend the practice and how remediation can cause the trace to abide for a little while longer. Remediation should not be considered as a medium represented in another as if there is an origin, for there is no such simplistic order in religious remediation. The nature of mediums is such that at one instance, it can be the mediated, and in the next instance, it can be the mediator. In that sense, the "look" that "cannot abide" is due to the changing look of the "look." There is a feedback system in place, where for example a writing can be informed by the speech one is going to perform live, or a

speech is only possible when it refers to a writing found elsewhere, written beforehand. Digital media presents another chain, network, mechanism or contact point by which other media assemble for the time being. I believe that Derrida hints at this possibility when he answers the magazine *La Quinzaine Littéraire*:

> La Quinzaine Littéraire: It could be said that the text that appears on the screen is a phantom text. There is no longer any matter, any ink. Now there is only light and shadows, whereas the book is a dense, material object.
>
> Derrida: The figure of the text "processed" on a computer is like a phantom to the extent that it is less bodily, more "spiritual," more ethereal. There is something like a disincarnation of the text in this. But its spectral silhouette remains, and what's more, for most intellectuals and writers, the program, the "software" of machines, still conforms to the spectral model of the book. Everything that appears on the screen is arranged within a view to books: writing, lines, numbered pages, coded indications of forms (*italics*, **bold**, etc.), the differences of the traditional shapes and characters. (Derrida 2005b, 30)

The "origin" of text on a computer that Derrida invokes is not a material object but a phantom, a spectral model that he earlier describes as another "cutoff point" or "interrupter" (Derrida 2005b, 28) and becomes another reference point that haunts. What this presents to a contemporary reader of Derrida is a more exact experience of those cutoff points, magnified and widely available—social media platforms, digital media, holograms, etc. The circumstance of digital media is not that it repurposes an older medium or has some origin in another technology (it definitely does) but at any one moment of its manifestation, or reproduced at an interface, it simultaneously reincarnates several other media at the same time, be it writing, speech, live performance, photograph. This is what I call a performative restoration for the virtual.

1.3.3.2   **Interface: Performative Restoration for the Virtual**

When writing about Hmong Shamans and their performances, Dwight Conquergood writes that shamanistic performance displays what Richard Schechner (in *Between Theater and Anthropology*) calls "restored behaviour" (Conquergood 2010, 485). Schechner explains that "restored bahavior is symbolic and reflexive: not empty but loaded behaviour multivocally broadcasting significances...the self can act in/as another; the social or transindividual self is a role or set of roles" (Schechner 1985, 36). Schechner further clarifies that "[r]estored behaviour offers to both individuals and groups the chance to rebecome what they once were—or even, and most often, to rebecome what they never were but wish to have been or wish to become" (Schechner 1985, 38). In my opinion, Schechner has a superficial understanding of restored behaviour when applied to spiritual practices. A spiritual practice is a much more complicated process when the broadcasting of the self includes a machine and a spiritual being. The supposed act of "rebecoming" is a loaded concept that needs further clarification.

Joseph Roach writes that "human agents draw on these resources of memory stored up (but also reinvented)," referring to Paul Connerton's description of the "incorporating practice" of memory as "sedimented or amassed in the body," in what he calls "the kinaesthetic imagination" (Roach 1996, 26). Citing the works of Mark Franko in *Dance as Text: Ideologies of the Baroque Body* (1993) and Susan Foster in *Storying Bodies: The Choreography of Narrative and Gender in the French Action Ballet* (1996), Roach reiterates Foster's demonstration of how "the dance can indeed be separated from the dancers as a transmittable form, a kinaesthetic vocabulary, one that can move up and down the social scale as well as from one generation to the next" (Roach 1996, 27). Stretching Roach's term further to fit my purpose, the kinaesthetic imagination that, for instance, spirit mediums in trance

during the Nine Emperor Gods festival draw on, is further complicated when "stored memory in the body" extends to the realm of the digital and the virtual, where 'stored memory' is transcoded into binary numbers of 1 and 0. In that sense, the "restored behaviour" of a possession trance expands in broadcasting terms, engaging audiences in more ways than one. In that process, the trance performance simultaneously restores a long ago practice and alters the tradition through the spirit medium's kinaesthetic imagination and body memory, especially when he or she addresses immediate conditions and present concerns.

Roach also writes that "the kinaesthetic imagination … inhabits the realm of the virtual … Its truth is the truth of simulation, of fantasy, or of daydreams, but its effect on human action may have material consequences of the most tangible sort and of the widest scope" (Roach 1996, 27). With digital technology, religious memory is amassed in a virtual body, which is a convergence of kinaesthetic/digital imagination and memory, restored behaviour, bodies and movements. In that sense, "restored behaviour" is not quite "restored" but reiterated, at once imprinting a past through a new medium, person or machine, and reappearing and disappearing as trace, to be taken up again somewhere else.

In that sense, I am proposing a variant to the notion of embodiment defined by performance theorists before me (Erika Fischer-Lichte and Richard Schechner). I am also including notions of embodiment to reengage with new media studies (McLuhan, Bolter and Grusin). I examine embodiment in relation to mediation, virtuality and the digital. It also encompasses the dual aspect of restoring and disappearing of religious practices as they are popularised, re-enacted and adapted. I define embodiment in the context of a religious practice as the substitutions of bodies for the purpose of giving a concentrated presence to an abstraction, a spirit or a philosophy, which is embodied only insofar as there is a body to take hold, manifest and reveal the abstract through an engaging practice. This embodiment is to be

found in the presence of a medium. This medium repeats the presence, but is inevitably replaced by another medium.

With the above considerations stated, this dissertation will attempt to theorise notions of virtuality, virtual spaces and interactions in the context of popular religion. More importantly, it will examine how popular religion is performed in and through new media.

Hence, the purpose of this thesis is to introduce an intervention on two levels:

1. Re-engage with performance theories and re-think what it means to analyse religious and spiritual practices, usually a great source for cultural and performance studies scholars on the subject of religion. How can the two fields of religious studies and performance studies benefit and inform each other?

2. Re-think what it means to practice a religion that is mediated and transmitted through technology and new media; and how mediums and media make religion work.

The intervention provides a chance to establish what is truly at stake. That is the second objective of this research: to articulate the position of performance theory in relation to religion and to explore the intersections between new media and embodied practice. This, I believe, will also enrich the fields of performance studies, religious studies and new media studies.

In *The Routledge Introduction to Theatre and Performance Studies* Erika Fischer-Lichte explains embodiment by referring to the anthropologist Thomas Csórdas's redefinition: the "existential ground of culture and self" (Fischer-Lichte 2014, 6). Fischer-Lichte writes that "he rejects the dualism of mind and body. For him, the mind does not exist outside of or opposed to the body but must be conceived of as embodied" (Fischer-Lichte 2014, 33). The concept of embodiment, for Fischer-Lichte, refers "to those fleeting bodily

processes through which the phenomenal body constitutes itself in its particularity and creates specific meanings" (Fischer-Lichte 2014, 33). For example, it seems apparent to her that "[a]ctors present their phenomenal bodies in a particular manner, so that they are experienced as present and simultaneously as a dramatic character like Hamlet or Medea. The actor creates both presence and the character through a special process of embodiment; neither presence nor dramatic character exists outside of the performance" (Fischer-Lichte 2014, 33). By focusing on what she calls "a strong concept of presence" (Fischer-Lichte 2014, 34), she emphasises a particular experience of performance as a combination of "embodiment" and "the presence of the performer" which together "creates a circulating energy that affects the spectators and ultimately produces an energetic response … the spectators will also feel present in the here and now in a special way." However, she does not clarify what this 'special way' is and concludes that the actors "appear as *embodied minds*" when they "bring forth their phenomenal body and its energy" (Fischer-Lichte 2014, 34). To a certain extent, this seems to be accurate when applied to an enclosed theatrical event, where spectators gather and concentrate on a performance. But the focus on presence neglects the possible disembodiments and absences that form when a performance is carried off to another present destination; it arrives somewhere else. The transience of performance presupposes a perpetual *poeisis*. Fischer-Lichte later shows her debt to Martin Heidegger by evoking the concept of being-in-the-world in the following passage:

> The materiality of the performance as a whole emerges through the materiality of the voice. It emerges as tonality because the voice sounds, it gains physicality because the voice leaves the body through breath, and it creates spatiality because it spreads through the space and enters the ears of the listeners...The bodily being-in-the-world of the speaker expresses itself and addresses the listener in his or her bodily-being-in-the-world." (Fischer-Lichte 2014, 36)

Ironically, she is expressing a technology or *techne* (just one of many other technologies in performance) that her insight conceals and ignores Heidegger's complex explanation of *poeisis*. Heidegger writes:

> Above all Enframing conceals that revealing which, in the sense of poiesis, lets what presences come forth into appearance … Thus the challenging Enframing not only conceals a former way of revealing, bringing-forth, but conceals revealing itself and with it, That wherein unconcealment, i.e. truth, comes to pass. (Heidegger 1977, 27)

Heidegger's concept is one of disjuncture and not synthesis and Erika-Fischte's concept of embodiment and presence has to be reworked in view of our digitally enframed worlds, with digital technology being part of theatre and performance. Between the listener and the voice-machine that is a performer's vocal system, the process reveals the sound but conceals the *poeisis* or how sound is brought forth. It is technological because it lets presence come forth into appearance by way of concealment and making absent other presences as the event comes to pass. Fischer-Lichte's being-in-the-world, to return to its place in Heidegger's conception, "belongs to the truth of Being that Being may never 'be' without beings, and that a being is never without Being" (Quoted and translated in Caputo 1978, 184 from Heidegger 1978, 46). One must not forget the ontological difference between Being and beings which "is the forgetfulness of the difference between Being and entities" (Quoted and translated in George 1998, 197 from Heidegger 1972, 336). *Das Zwischen* of Being and beings or "the between" has to be understood, and this intermediary brings forth the other worlds, as the performer gets involved in them, not always in his or her own forging, but in a perpetual embodiment of the presence of other beings—or what I have mentioned earlier, mediums.

1.4   Summaries of Chapters

The above theoretical perspectives can only find their meanings in the manifestations available in reality. Therefore, I will be exploring them through a set of case studies in the following chapters, in order to study the themes and concepts introduced in this introduction. These case studies will illustrate exactly how theories and studies of religion, new media and performance can intersect and an interdisciplinary discourse can be formed that closely traces the developments of popular religious practices. In practice, I observe how popular religion have brought together religious, media and performance forms to express and further their religious beliefs.

In Chapter 2, the focus is on my position as a researcher/observer but I also rely on an assistant to a Taoist spirit medium and consider his functions as interpreter, actor and god-son of the spirit medium. Unable to be possessed by a god, this assistant still performs a spiritual function. He connects the often imperceptible possessed spirit medium with a devotee who cannot understand the verbal or physical language of the spirit medium. This gives rise to a chain of signification that is personal as well as traditional, for the religious practice must rely on the personal interpretation of a bodily tradition to preserve and retain its place in the religious community. The assistant blogs and posts his observations online, reproducing his experience of his practice. This way, he is more than just an assistant to a spiritual practice— he re-contextualises a sacred practice in a public domain, as many others are doing for the Taoist popular religion in Singapore.

In Chapter 3, I move from the assistant to his eighty-year-old godfather, who is a spirit medium of the Monkey God, and examine his spiritual practice. By interviewing and following the medium assistant and observing his godfather, I gain insights into the Monkey God temple practice in Singapore. I consider the efficacy of the spirit medium's practice,

which includes healing, exorcism and spirit possession, and examine how they relate to their community and beyond. Caught in a web of spatial and temporal configurations, my research subjects manifest the constant negotiation and transformation of religious codes and forms, embodying their deity as much as having to be themselves. These constant shifts and substitutions perform a critical example of how an embodied practice can reiterate a tradition as an imprint of the old but simultaneously reiterate the practice as a trace. For example, when the spirit medium's aged body attempts to re-perform the acrobatic and youthful Monkey God, the practice reiterates both the acrobatic tradition as well as the need to address the present situation of the aging body.

In Chapter 4, I closely observe the Nine Emperor Gods Festival as practiced in Singapore from 2010 to 2013 and make several connections between Taoist technology, or more specifically, the techniques and machines such as the use of the Eight Trigrams to determine spatial configurations and make divinations, and the new media technology that is increasingly being incorporated into the practice.

Since 2010, I have been studying this festival and have participated in the processions. Walking with the worshippers and taking the free transport to the beach, where the gods are invited from the sea, I witness a performance of what I call "virtual spirituality." The spirituality of the Nine Emperor Gods can be described as dispersed yet connected, as the deities are believed to be contained in different vessels—human mediums and objects such as tablets and palanquins—in different locations simultaneously. Today's digital media such as smartphones, tablets and social network platforms have made the old festival more contemporary and complex as information and images are documented, reproduced and disseminated online, thus allowing deities to travel and manifest in more forms and at a faster speed. This extends the Taoist understanding of spirit possession and mediumship, implicit in the Eight-Trigrams—a system of Taoist symbols to represent the fundamental principles and

elements of the universe. The Taoist gods are made available not only in spirit and in body, but also in the virtual.

Chapter 5 begins the case study of Ku Witaya and his friends, who in the pursuit of a theory that they could reincarnate as digital spirits in an online game, took their lives. On 23 August 2008 in Singapore, 16 year-old Ku Witaya, a "home-trained, self-professed Taoist medium … convince[d] six teenagers … to enter into a suicide pact" (*The Straits Times*, 7 Sept 2009). During weekly rituals, Witaya would reportedly be possessed by gods and speak in fluent Hokkien. Witaya, influenced by the online game, *Slayers*[6], told his friends that they had to die together to become 'slayers' to kill demons threatening the world. He and his close friend, Sia Chan Hong, leaped out of the ninth floor bedroom window while the rest backed out. This chapter tells the story of Ku Witaya and Sia Chan Hong and attempts to explain Ku Witaya's synthesis of online video game avatars and Taoist deities: How can the two be connected? How can Witaya's theory be understood beyond being just a desire to 'prove' his beliefs but as a result of a complex fusion of forms? What happens when humans desire to be spirits and envisage their supposed divine realm as virtual spaces (World Wide Web)? Does this reveal more about the digital media involved or the nature of spirit possession; or both? I shall look at both online gaming and spirit mediumship individually whilst finding the possible interactions and intersections of the two. Witaya's case may be the most extreme in that it resulted in him killing himself, but the example reveals the unique possibility that the digital media and virtual spaces resemble in the popular conception of spiritual and celestial spaces. As Michael Taussig questions, "[c]ould it be that the symbols of the emphatically non-sacred are themselves profoundly sacred?" (Taussig 1997, 188). I argue that a fixated

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[6] The game, which is now defunct and offline, can still be visited at the following web address: http://slayers.onlinegame.com/.

demarcation of symbols as non-sacred or sacred is delimiting and insufficiently accounts for the rich fusion of forms, formats and media in popular religious practices.

Chapter 6 comes at the end as a response to my work on Taoist spirituality and technology and reconsiders the manifestation of Christianity that is enframed in new media technology. The reverberations of Witaya's case lead me to re-think the Christian experience in Singapore and the implications of being a Christian in today's technologically advanced world. The case study of Christmas shows and how they are conceived and performed in Singapore presents an opportunity to study a different religious context in Singapore and how the earlier arguments on media and performance could be made for another popular religious practice. It can also be indicative of possible developments of religious practices as societies become increasingly connected to digital networks.

This chapter includes a study on the different concepts of the Holy Spirit. The strong belief in bodily experiences of the Holy Spirit, such as the ability to speak in tongues, draw our attention to the similarities in Uncle Cheong's accounts of the Taoist spirit medium who speaks in an archaic Hokkien dialect when he is possessed or Witaya's ability to speak Hokkien during his possessed state. More importantly, by comparing all three case studies and analysing how they proliferate and constitute themselves, it becomes clear that religious interfaces created and proliferated via digital media cross the boundaries of technology and spirituality.

A Christmas show is an ideal case study because it attempts to reach out to non-believers, who are familiar with supposedly non-sacred elements and technology which at the same time, must reflect a church's doctrinal and denominational standpoints. Christmas shows in Singapore heavily rely on the latest multimedia technology for its marketing and production—video trailers, concert performance, live bands, publicity posters and well

equipped auditoriums with built-in sound systems and sophisticated lighting rigs. I argue that a religious interface is always an assemblage of mediums and media, and the technological and spiritual. It includes digital mediation because worked into a popular religion is the capacity to fuse forms and showcase faces—because God has no face, so his messengers' faces come to the fore. By all means their faces are projected and multiplied on all types of screens and surfaces.

I hope that the destinations I take the reader to will in other ways carry the reader to other journeys of discovery, just as religious practices take on variegated and diverse forms, shapes and media. Ultimately, the aim of this project is to ascertain the role of mediums and media in the specific context of Taoism as practiced in Singapore. Theoretical perspectives informed by popular Taoist practices can in turn help to examine other religious contexts, Charismatic practices, and discover their particular crossings and departures. What is common still is the technology in use to mediate and represent the spiritual, where the abstract and invisible require the material to appear. Eventually, an understanding of medium and media can perhaps allow us to explore and examine other places and issues where technology and representation define human experience.

I have already mentioned the thesis's emphasis on the technological, philosophical and spiritual expressions of religious practice. It must be restated that they do not exist in isolation from each other. It is my hope that analysts and readers belonging to any one of the three areas would consider the advantage of merging the three and participate in the exegesis of their combination. The case studies have been carefully chosen to show their empirical formation and how their concrete realities manifest the entanglement of the three parts. They exist altogether without clear divisions. This work will provide readers with alternative conceptions to how the three parts can occur, interact, and in some cases contradict in devastating ways. More than just examining the interculturality, intermodality, and

intertextuality of the phenomena, the case studies mutually depend on the tripartite theoretical framework to articulate an interface that encapsulates the lived experience of religion in its array of modes, forms and expressions. I suggest that analytical permutations of the tripartite relationship can be formed: the spiritual as it is thought of philosophically and practiced technologically, a philosophy of spirituality based on its technological manifestations, or a spirituality of technology that dramatises alternative conceptions of metaphysics, traditions of continental philosophy or Taoist philosophy; the possibilities are there. The significant ones will be examined more concretely in the chapters and case studies to come.

Chapter 2

Medium's Medium: Table Talks of a Medium to a Spirit Medium

In this chapter, I closely examine the religious practice and beliefs of one individual, Uncle Cheong Yew Soon, a medium assistant. Uncle[1] Cheong Yew Soon performs the multiple roles of story-teller, medium, interviewee and friend as I attempt to make sense of his religious practice and experience. He is a subject of interest because of his experience as a spirit medium's assistant or *Zhoutou* or (Chinese: 桌, which can be literally translated as "head of the table"). Each encounter with him has helped to illuminate his particular practice of Taoism. He speaks several Chinese dialects and acts as an interpreter for devotees when the spirit medium speaks in an archaic dialect while answering a devotee's question. He is also an avid blogger who often shares his photographs and information on his blogs and online forums.

Through Uncle Cheong's narration, I gained insights into the nuances and particularities of his religious life. Our conversations draw attention to the problems of religious representation and the complexities of mediumship: the spirit medium as a physical spirit vessel for his deity, Uncle Cheong as the spirit medium's translator, a representative of his religious practice, from which I have come to understand his religious practice, and I as the archivist of our dialogues. Uncle Cheong's experiences evoke multiple worlds: the divine world of spirits and gods, the virtual world of the Internet and the immediate physical world. More importantly, his religious practice reveals the possibility that embodied practices (spirit medium on trance) can participate and still retain their sacred identity in a digital environment. Uncle Cheong describes an interface where multiple actors come into play in an

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[1] "Uncle" is a friendly address used colloquially in Singapore to refer to elders.

organic way. I look at Uncle Cheong's practice as consisting of movement, displacement, transformation, translation and enrolment, where he is involved in every aspect of a spirit medium's practice. He, like the anointed spirit medium, forms an association between entities, both humans and non-humans. However, at any given moment when gods and spirits possess humans and objects, Uncle Cheong is the specific agent that connects all possible types of interactions together. He, more so than a spirit medium, straddles more nodes of interactions between gods, humans, objects and virtual entities.

From my one-to-one conversations with Uncle Cheong, I was then included in his temple rituals, where I met other temple devotees. I was able to observe how mediums "make other people act" (Latour 2007, 236). 'Mediums' is not exactly what Latour is referring to when he talks about "agencies that make people do things" (Latour 2007, 235) but his questions about the methods of social sciences are relevant to the motivation behind my conversations with Uncle Cheong. One of Latour's questions goes to the heart of the matter: "Can we trace social connections shifting from one non-social being to the next, instead of replacing all entities populating the world by some ersatz made 'of' social stuff?" (Latour 2007, 236). Citing religion as an example "bulldozed to death by critical sociology," he suggests to include the agencies that make people do things, and in the case of religion, that would include divinities, spirits and voices (Latour 2007, 235-236).

This chapter is not an attempt to critique critical sociology. It does, however, carefully consider Latour's provocation to approach the study of religion from the individual's sphere of belief. It also takes the motivations that cause one to practice a religious belief seriously. Often these motivations are connected to the 'non-social' or invisible agencies that Latour loosely refers to. As individuals encounter and pray to their gods and spiritual beings on a daily basis, how an individual acts and relates to others in a religious situation is informed by one's subjective experience of his or her deity. By engaging in a direct face-to-face

interaction with Uncle Cheong, I aim to demonstrate the complexities of face-to-face (or rather face-to-face with faces of a divinity) interactions between deity and spirit medium, and spirit medium and his assistant and externalise through my dialogues, the functions of interpretation, translation and performativity. In other words, the spirit medium's assistant makes other people, spiritual beings and objects act. More importantly, the dialogues highlight the varying factors—language, interpretation and mediumship—that make religious practice creative and performative.

Table Talk （Chinese: 桌头话）

> You speak and I write to you as in a dream everything that you are willing to let me say. (Derrida 1987, 160)

2012, July 11 / 2012 年 7 月 11 日

I called Uncle Cheong for the first time after I received his number from my friend, his daughter. I had met him before and talked a bit so I didn't have to reintroduce myself:

"Hi Uncle Cheong, this is Alvin. Are you free to talk?"

"Yes yes. I already heard from my daughter."

"Yes, will you be free next week to have a chat about your religious belief?"

He agreed to meet and we arranged the date.

2012, July 18, 3:10pm

I sent a SMS last night to confirm the meeting. The next day, I met Uncle Cheong at his house in Serangoon[2], in the northeast of Singapore. The reason why I approached Uncle

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[2] The Serangoon area is situated next to a long and major stretch of road, Upper Serangoon Road. It extends up to the Northeast area of Singapore, where many Chinese resettlers from villages or "Kampong" around the

Cheong to be my main informant and interviewee was because of the unique position he holds in a local Chinese temple.

"Feel free to ask anything. I'll answer everything to the best of my knowledge."

"Testing."

I checked my voice recorder and I started the recording. After several awkward pauses and a brief introduction, from which we found out that we are both born in August, we finally arrived at the crux of the first interview.

"Does your family practice your religion?"

"Yes, my wife follows me faithfully. But my daughter, now that she has grown up, no, she's less (*Pause.*) adhered to me [sic] does not follow me. Because when she was younger, I would always bring her along and tell her, 'Sorry, we are actually Taoists. This is how we pray, and normally we pray for safety.'"

Uncle Cheong thinks that his daughter would still refer to herself as a Taoist. But it caught me by surprise, listening back to the recording that he apologised to her for being a Taoist. Uncle Cheong was expressing a deep regret that she is no longer a practising Taoist. At the same time, I believe the apology was also an expression of his view that she has every right to choose her religious belief and she does not need to be a Taoist by default. I wondered if this was something I should have told her. I felt like I had become a messenger for Uncle Cheong.

2014, February 15

More than a year later, Uncle Cheong asked if I could invite his daughter to the annual Hungry Ghosts Festival dinner that his temple organises. He said that if I went, his daughter

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Punggol coast moved to the Northeastern housing estates by the mid-1990s. Upper Serangoon Road connects to Serangoon Road, which is an older road that stretches into the heart of the Indian community and the city centre. Important Hindu, Buddhist and Taoist temples are located along the two stretches of roads and Uncle Cheong's temple is located along Serangoon Road, near the housing estate of Boon Keng.

and son-in-law would attend. The dinner happened around August, which was too late for me to include it in my analysis.

2012, July 18, 3:21pm

When I asked about how he came to practise Taoism; and if he practised it since he was young, he said, "Yes…When I was [young] … actually I believe in the religion not because my parents were Taoists. Actually it was because of my personal experience. When I was 12, I became inclined [to believe] … actually because my father brought me to a celebration. When I saw the spirit medium…at that time he was not my godfather yet…but when I looked at my godfather then, and he was in his thirties. I was drawn to his look, I liked his look so much…"

"Can you describe the look?"

"He was so *Cixiang* (Chinese: 慈祥 or to have a kindly countenance)."

We began to talk about how his godfather had a profound influence on Uncle Cheong. It was as he described, a "feeling" that he had "at first sight."

"I want to get to know him more and by default I want to pick up the religion. Not because my dad believe. You got the feeling that the gods really exist."

He alluded to 'feeling' a lot to explain his belief. But it was an actual experience that convinced him of his belief in Taoist gods.

Every year, during a festival celebration, such as on the birthday of his temple deity, Monkey God, devotees can "bid" for an incense burner and bring it back to their house altar for a year. It was at that time when he was a 12 year old boy that his father bid for the incense burner and won the bid. When Uncle Cheong's father returned the burner back to the temple a year later, Uncle Cheong fell sick very soon after.

"I fall sick because later we go and actually ask the Chinese spirit medium in trance and he said, 'Actually when you bring the incense burner back to your house ah, you shifted your original one to one side.' Because no space mah, so because the incense burner was returned to the temple, we didn't return the house incense burner to the original position."

It initially did not occur to Uncle Cheong that his sickness was linked to the wrong positioning of the incense burner. The spirit medium explained this to him and after his father returned the burner to the correct position, Cheong immediately recovered. In Figure 1, you can see that the incense burner is placed symmetrically and aligned to the centre, relative to the figures of the deities.

FIG. 1. Uncle Cheong's family altar, with seven invited gods. From left to right:
Zhun Ti Fo Zu (准提佛祖*), Lian Hua San Tai* Zi　(莲花三太子*), Da Bo Gong
(*大伯公), Goddess Of Mercy (观音佛祖), Monkey God (齐天大圣), *Guan Di
Sheng Jun* (关帝圣君/关帝爷文) *Guan Gong* (关帝爷武).
Photo: Alvin Lim

Uncle Cheong explained that it required a personal experience to convince him that the religion was 'real'. Otherwise, he would have blindly followed his parents. After that

experience, he decided to become an active participant at his godfather's temple. This furthers an important point on how the altar is conceived and the positioning of the gods' figures.

Uprooting of Gods

2012, July 18, 3:53pm

"Actually, the first Taoist god we invite was *Dua Pek Gong*. That was in the old house. My mum always say Goddess of Mercy is always taking care of you. So we invite *Guanyinma* to the house. But then, wait, you cannot have two. Must have three or five. After seven no control. Until today I don't know why."

According to Uncle Cheong, there must be an odd number of gods at the altar. He believes that a mediator is always needed when the gods quarrel. There appears to be only six figures of the deities but the seventh is actually a talismanic vessel of *Zhun Ti Fo Zu* (Chinese: 准提佛祖), in the form of writing and an image.

"That one my mother invite."

Taoists believe that objects and writings can hold the spiritual essence of a deity, as long as certain performative conditions are in place, as shown by the above example. The designs of the figures of God at an altar follow the widely accepted appearances of gods on images, icons, statues and figures. There will always be slight variations and personal touches (depending on the craftsman who carves the figures) but there is a ritual that differentiates it from object to sacred vessel.

A closer analysis of the derivation of *Zhun Ti Fo Zu* (Hokkien) reveals that it is the Hokkien Chinese's version of the *Cundi* Bodhisattva. Furthermore, Daniel L. Overmyer explains that the *Cundi* is a "form of the Bodhisattva *Kuan-yin*, also identified with Marīci, the "Queen of Heaven," represented with multiple eyes and arms" (Overmyer 1999, 365).

The exact number is actually a thousand arms and a thousand eyes (Chinese: 千手千眼观音). However, it is commonly depicted to have eighteen arms. As Chün-fang Yü points out, "as the cult of Kuan-yin took root in China, the bodhisattva's converts were ready to perceive and present Kuan-yin in new ways more congenial to the Chinese audience… Kuan-yin was not only portrayed in new ways, but also given new epithets and names" (Yü 2000, 232). Between the 10th century and 16th century, Yü shows us that "indigenous sutras" were written and "new rituals" were formulated "to glorify and worship Kuan-yin," and images (such as those reproduced in Yü's monograph) were used alongside those sutras and rituals. Yü summarises this long historical process as "only natural that they also created new and indigenous iconographic representations" and he hypothesises that "[depictions of Kuan-yin] did not remain simply as art forms, but were enhanced by rituals and religious practices" (Yü 2000, 232).

Yü calls this process of enhancement "domestication." I refer to this process, however, as *Qinshen* or inviting the god. My hypothesis is that within the framework of the popular Taoist practice of "inviting the gods" to altars at new houses, new sites and temples, those multiple acts of displacement and replacement make it possible for figures and images of deities to be mixed and grouped together. The grouping of gods is based on a combination of pre-existing rules and personal attachment to a particular god. Honouring the emperor gods and deities with the most important titles in the celestial realms first is considered a basic requirement. But the order of the deities can equally be based on a personal attachment to a particular deity. As mentioned earlier, Uncle Cheong invited the Goddess of Mercy first because his mother believes the goddess has always taken care of him. Uncle Cheong also mentioned a rule that he thinks is similar to the corporate world:

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"You respect the god you invite first; the one that stay the longest in your house. The first god to be invited usually takes the centre position."

In a more recent phone conversation, I asked Uncle Cheong to clarify the ritual of inviting the deities, which he once described to me almost two years ago:

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"When you buy a new statue, you go to the temple to open the statue."

"Open the statue?"

"Means to let the god you wish to invite to identify the statue and enter it."

Not only was I lost in translation, Uncle Cheong was lost for English words to find a better word to substitute "open" or to explain how a god can "enter" a statue.[3] But soon enough he related a series of performative acts that signal the god's possession of the statue or figure and prove to the believer that the act of invitation is achieved.

"When you go to the temple, you can ask a spirit medium to help you to 'open' the statue. The spirit medium will go into trance, and use either their blood or red ink and draw dots on the eyes, forehead, and shoulders of the statue."

"So do you need the spirit medium of the particular god you are inviting to be the one carrying out the ritual?"

"Oh, no no no, any temple or spirit medium will do."

"So say you are inviting *Guandiye* to the figure, this means that the spirit medium does not have to be a spirit medium chosen by *Guandiye*."

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[3] This was the first instance when I began to wonder how translation features in the temple rituals, especially between spirit mediums and devotees who come to them for guidance and divinations. The theme of translation and mistranslation informs my later analysis of Uncle Cheong's role as an interpreter and how he has to translate or in some cases mistranslate the spirit medium's instructions to the devotees. See Chapter 3 for a more detailed analysis.

"Yah, so for example the Monkey God spirit medium can do for you if you're inviting *Guandiye*. The medium is only there to tell the god that this is your statue and you've been invited to enter the statue."

What seems more crucial to Uncle Cheong is that the deity figure must be specified, through general gestures and performative acts that are meant for a specific god. Red paper is used to cover the face of the figure:

"Before any outside spirit enter, the red paper can block out. Then you remove the paper when you reach the temple."

It is clear to me that the design of the "statue" (Uncle Cheong is actually referring to a smaller figure or figurine) is not the only crucial element of the ritual—it is the combined acts of interventions, and the process of rendering a figure into a vessel meant specifically for the god. Because now the figure is performatively specified as a vessel, there are also proper protocols that must be followed. When I asked Uncle Cheong about moving gods from one house to another, he provided another set of rules:

"Burn 3 joss sticks as you carry the statue. And don't go up the lift. It's very dirty. Either because someone urinate there or there may be evil spirits. Take the stairs. So if you live at the tenth floor, you must still climb up."

The movement of gods from one place to another place can be done without a spirit medium. But certain procedures must be followed to ensure the safe passage and assembly of the altar.

"Before reaching the new altar, water that willow branches soaked in it must be sprinkled all around the altar."

"How did you learn to do all this?"

"Some I learn from my parents. Later when I follow my godfather, I observed and learned."

This process is already a hybridised offshoot of rituals that can be observed in both Buddhist and Taoist worship. Christine Mollier, when examining *Guanyin* in a Taoist guise, notes close parallels to both Taoist and Buddhist religious texts that stipulate how the place of worship or "household's pure chamber" is to be set up: "where an image of the deity is hung above an altar equipped with an incense burner" (Mollier 2008, 200). Mollier writes that the reforms in the modalities of the practice of the Jiuku tianzun's domestic cult, as the religious texts that came in the Tang period, were either reduced or began to show the merging of religious forms: "for the *Scripture of the Savior from Suffering,* there is no longer any question of worshipping the Jiuku tianzun for the Ten Directions, for the deity is now conceived as a unique anthropomorphic figure with established iconographic features" (Mollier 2008, 200). Uncle Cheong's altar recalls the medieval China's altar set up of "an image of the deity hung above an altar equipped with an incense burner." Moreover, his altar reflects the anthropomorphic refiguring of deities through repetition: the central figure of *Guanyin* (or Kuan-yin as spelt in other sources) at his altar is reconstituted in a new form as the *Cundi* Bodhisattva with its iconographic features of multiplied eyes and arms. The result is a unique division of deities, repetition and convergence of god-forms, where an individual can personally define the order and names of the gods at an altar. Furthermore, the Taoist gods or rather the images of gods are displaced when one is invited to take the shape, design and form of the newly made statue, figure or painting.

It is not only the faces of gods that get defaced and are morphed into new ones when for example a sculptor re-imagines a new face for a statue—a lighter shade of the skin colour, the length of a beard, or a different head dress. Ritualistic practices are also known to be mixed and shared among religious beliefs. One such practice is the converged ritualistic prescription of the willow branch and pure water used to purify the altar:

> The text [*Scripture of the Savior from Suffering*] prescribes that a willow branch and pure water be
>
> placed in front of his icon with a series of other items that further demonstrates the deity's established

role as healer: flowers (current both in Buddhist and Taoist worship), medicinal plants, and young shoots of cereals—substances that were also used in Tantric rituals, above all for the consecration of vases of pure water for therapeutic processes. (Mollier 2008, 200)

Uncle Cheong warns that the water, mixed with both willow twigs and flowers, has to be used to 'cleanse' the altar before the statues and incense burner are placed on it. The god-figure, once placed in position, is verbally asked to confirm if it is at the correct position. The god-figure is deemed to answer through the use of two wooden *shen pei* (Chinese: 聖杯, literally translated as "holy cups")—one surface is flat, the other is curved. After asking the god, the devotee carrying out the rite will throw the *shen pei*, and if they land showing opposite sides—one curved and the other flat—this means that the position of the statue is correct. This act is repeated for the incense burner. This is also one instance where a person can communicate with the god via a tool, conveying messages with a simple yes or no answer.

The final step is to offer the god fruits, food and joss sticks. Joss paper is next burnt as a final transaction, marking the space as protected and blessed by the god. Uncle Cheong further warns,

"The gods have to be first invited before you stay in the new house."

"Then how do you decide which god comes first? How do you position their statues?"

"When you're facing the altar, the right hand side is bigger. The first invited god in the house is in the centre. It's like in a company, the longest serving employee the new people that come in must respect."

By "big" Uncle Cheong refers to the hierarchy of gods. He explains that experience tells him how to determine the order of the gods, but there is no hard rule to the order. The key point is that there has to be an odd number of invited gods. The Money God is placed on the right side of the Goddess of Mercy (the first to be invited) primarily because of his

devotion to the Monkey God cult and temple. *Dua Pek Gong* is on the left of the Goddess of Mercy but in another family altar, he can be the main deity. Although *Dua Pek Gong* was the main god in his old house, Uncle Cheong has decided to place the Goddess of Mercy as the main god at his own altar because of his personal devotion to the deity and his mother's original advice to him.

While it may seem that those rites described above are passed down as tradition, the fact is that they are developed after a long process of assimilation of religious forms, images and practices. The devotee, thus, is the key figure in this assimilation, because very often he or she bases his or her practice on those before them and they may be arbitrarily based on practices borrowed or adopted elsewhere. From the example of the positioning of the statues, it is clear to me of the arbitrary nature of the religious practice, but it goes beyond this observation.

The faces of gods, and here I am expressing more than a polytheistic concept, are neither the faces of Uncle Cheong's gods nor those figures of man: they are the resemblances. Would Jacques Derrida subscribe to his subscription of Edmond Jabès's sentence from the *Book of Questions*: "All faces are His; this is why HE has no face" (Derrida 2006a, 135) when asked to interpret the Taoist gods? I asked this because much of Derrida's conception of 'religion' is tied to the Judeo-Christian concepts of salvation and redemption, and before or after sin. Derrida's question, "How to talk religion" (Derrida 2002, 42) traces the ancient trajectory of discourses and debates pertaining to sin and salvation, evil and abstraction. In fact, Derrida suggests an inevitability in linking "the question of religion to that of the evil of abstraction" and hints at a theoretical history that assumes reproduction as a loss of a supposed aurality, or imitation of the sacred as a Platonic copy far from reality. To put it simply, I would like to offer my own point of departure from the Judeo-Christian tradition, but meet somewhere along the way at those "sites of abstraction that are the machine,

technics, technoscience and above all the transcendence of tele-technology" (Derrida 2002, 43). To answer his question of 'how', popular Taoist practices might offer one possible answer to 'how to talk religion', and loosen the restrictive formation of religion from a Judeo-Christian gaze. With that focus, faces or rather resemblances of gods can be talked about without the connotations of evil, mimicry and poor imitation. In fact, Jonas A. Barish (1985) had written a book on the anti-theatrical prejudice, which traces the passionate antipathy toward theatre throughout the centuries, which may provide the reader with an overview of this prejudice (See Barish's *The Anti-theatrical Prejudice*). Popular Taoist practices demonstrate the dependence on theatre or theatrical devices to perform the gods. Hence, a more nuanced understanding of the performativity of gods and how mediums mediate and reproduce spiritual presence is needed. As mentioned, the focus will be on the efficacy of the performance.

One such performance is the **distribution** of the faces of any one particular Taoist god. The faces of gods split, divide and repeat: the God of War, *Guandiye* is represented twice on Uncle Cheong's altar, both of which are positioned on the right, when I face the altar. On the left of the two *Guandiye* figures is *Guan Di Sheng Jun* (Chinese: 关帝圣君) and the other is *Guan Di Ye Wu* (Chinese: 关帝爷武). The former represents the deity as a tactician, a civil official, and as a god of wisdom and the latter represents the deity as a war general, and a god of justice and protection. While the figures and faces of the god are repeated, Taoists believe that a deity can be represented in multiple forms. The question here is: can I also say that the faces of gods disappear forever in showing themselves (Derrida 2006a, 135)? Here, in ways different from the face of Yahweh that Derrida evokes, the multiple faces disappear because there are a multitude of faces perpetually showing themselves. In the case of spirit possessions, the face of god is literally that of man. Thus, the overabundance of the signifier is, to borrow Derrida's terms again (Derrida 2006d, 367), not a result of finitude or of a lack

but the result of constant supplementation and over-signification. Instead of seeing the face of god as being wholly human, and as a tension with history and with the myth of a particular deity, to a practitioner and believer of a popular Taoist practice, the focus is always of efficacy and the present performativity of the face of a god. It is also the unity of a *becoming* [with emphasis] of man and god, coming together and calling forth the possibility of religious efficacy. What it then calls for is translation and interpretation of what is already ambiguous to begin with.

Table Talk 2: Translation and Interpretation

2012, July 18, 3:31pm

Going as far back as forty years, Uncle Cheong told me his selected stories of how he trained himself to be an assistant or *Zhoutou*. While Uncle Cheong describes himself as an assistant in English, the *Zhoutou* does more than assist. In many respects, he leads and directs the rituals. The *Zhoutou* is also an interpreter (of signs) and translator.

"Actually I was not good at Chinese."

"Really? I cannot tell!"

Uncle explained that he was not good in Mandarin but as he witnessed more spirit possessions, he felt the need to learn Mandarin. This was directly linked to his increased role at the temple. When his godfather goes into trance, he speaks in an archaic Hokkien, and the people around them cannot understand the Hokkien spoken. When the *Zhuotou* has to interpret the dialect to a temple devotee (a person who visits the spirit medium to ask for solutions or blessings, sometimes referred to as a client), he translates the message into Mandarin. In that process, he interprets the message but there are complications in the

interpretative process. Uncle Cheong admitted that he sometimes could not hear the message in full.

As mentioned, the Hokkien language spoken by spirit mediums when possessed is a more archaic form of the Hokkien dialect, not often spoken even by Singaporean locals. In other cases, the medium could speak in Thai, if the gods that possessed him or her is a Thai Buddha or Bodhisattva. As Uncle Cheong is no longer involved as a *Zhoutou* and he cannot show me how he interprets messages and translates them, I chose to use online sources to relate the process. But Uncle Cheong confirmed that this is very similar to what he did last time.

FIG. 2. Screenshot of a YouTube video, posted by "isetan78" that shows a man who was unsuspectingly possessed by the temple's patron god and begins to convey messages to the people around him.

One of these sources, where a *Zhoutou* translates a message to an understandable dialect is a clip from YouTube where the medium speaks in Hokkien but as the possession prolongs, he is unable to communicate clearly to the other Hokkien speakers in the temple. The subtitles and the captions below the video[4] suggest that the fifth brother of the Nine Emperor Gods has suddenly possessed a man in a temple. Further details in the comments

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[4] Please see "(Chinese Temple) 斗母宫" at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zBSlyfFAkjg for a full recording of the event.

section tell us that the man was chatting with his friends when the god possessed him. In the clip, the unsuspecting man first begins to tremble. His company are already poised to support him. Though the possession is unexpected, everyone seems to be familiar with what is going on and immediately reacts to the situation. The next violent movements are anticipated and as he jerks up and down, a man suggests that he has a change of clothes. They take off his shirt and move him to a wooden chair, carved with religious motifs and commonly used for gods to sit on. Calming the god down by firmly holding him, they lift him and the chair to an inner room where he can face his own statue. Upon arriving at the altar room, the god now moves more violently and a religious leader acts on cue to pass him joss sticks. As he hits himself with bunches of sticks, he gestures for a cloth to be worn over his head. Though he is not fully clothed (compare this to the images of the Nine Emperors in Chapter 4), the god completes his possession as the gestures now seem more purposeful and he has some physical control of the human medium. There is even a moment of connection with the temple members as he deliberately passes the sticks back to the religious leader. He stumbles to the altar table and hits the table repeatedly in strong and heavy blows. The rest advise him to stop as this would hurt his body vessel. But in the conversation that ensues we understand that he is angry and the hitting of the table is an expression of his anger. The speech of the god, however, begins with a stammer, a speech impediment that suggests that the god does not have complete control. Nevertheless, he is able to utter some phrases at a time, as the leader now surrounds him for a reason to possess a man so suddenly. The leader understands that the god is angered by someone but it is not clear by whom. The collective interpretation by the group tells us that he is angered by a child or person who is immature, when one of them says, "he is only a child" in Hokkien to the god so as to calm him down. The god spells out some instructions and the rest quickly moves to the next process. Another man wearing a white T-shirt takes over and acts as the interpreter. The god sits back in his chair and joss

paper is brought to him. Everyone else breaks into a singing chant, but when the god speaks again, they quieten down to listen to what he has to say. We now understand through the interpreter that he asks for water (with ashes from a burnt incense paper) and a towel. He does not speak much now, instead relies on his gestures to make sense to his followers. The experienced interpreter quickly interprets his gestures and understands that the items he requested are to be used tomorrow by placing the towel over the big urn in front of them. When asked further when he would like the rite to be done, he utters a single character 'Zha' or the first character that makes up "早上" in Hokkien. This is immediately understood that the next morning will be the time for performing the rite. At this point, I understand that the towel is to be soaked in the water and placed on the urn. This perhaps signifies that the god will 'cool' down when a wet towel is placed over his head, metaphorically represented by the hard metallic surface of the urn. As I am lost in translation over the other gestures and half-lines, I am reminded of the rites that my mother performed on me whenever I had fever as a child. She would also put a wet towel on my forehead, which would earlier be soaked in water that contained a branch from a small white willow tree, over my forehead.

For the clip, I have to rely on the gestures and the interpreter's translation to understand. In such a spirit possession, speech and writing (e.g. when a medium writes talismans on pieces of yellow paper) function as "gestures"—there is literally a "theft of the body" (Derrida 2006b, 302) when the god possesses the unsuspecting person during a gathering of friends and leaves "the body to be strangely concealed by the very [god] that constitutes it as diaphanousness" (Derrida 2006b, 302). It is as if one is experiencing both the man and the god simultaneously, having now taken off one's shirt. This is made known by what Derrida calls a "shout" — "the articulations of language [Hokkien] is not yet entirely frozen" (Derrida 2006b, 302). As the shout announces the presence of the god, it reaches a moment when the words are not yet born, when articulation is no longer a shout but not yet a

discourse, when repetition is almost impossible, and along with it, language in general: the separation of concept and sound … the guttural moans and heavy beatings on the altar, then, the freedom of translation and tradition, the movement of interpretation, the difference between the soul and the body, the master and the servant, God and man … (Derrida 2006b, 302-303). Here, it is the movement of translation, tradition and interpretation that I am concerned with; despite the separation of concept, i.e. an understanding of what the possessed man is trying to say, and the particular sound of what is said, there is almost an obligation to interpret and to create a discourse out of the shouts. The interpreters stand beside, communicating on behalf of the god and passing instructions to his followers; where speech and physical movements combine to make sense. This is a well-established tradition, where I can confirm that Uncle Cheong's description is manifested in other temple possessions. In the subsequent chapters, I will elaborate on how the acts of translation and interpretation, especially those carried out by the *Zhoutou* in relation to a spirit medium, are key aspects of spirit possession.

To be certain, I asked Uncle Cheong of the possibility of misinterpretation. He clarifies that the god usually guides the process and there are typical answers that he can tell the follower/client/patient (see Chapter 3 on the definitions of patient and Taoist healing rituals) who asked the question. There is no perfect translation of the Hokkien but as long as the main message is communicated to the audience, the possession is considered a success and the follower leaves with a certain set of rites to accomplish at home. It is equally important if the wish is answered and the follower's problem is solved that he or she must give offerings and thank the god for the blessing. Otherwise, the problem would return.

The above example adds on to the arbitrariness of the religious practice. At the heart of the practice is the *Zhoutou*. In many cases covered in the dissertation, I will present other examples of the *Zhoutou*'s roles and functions. In Uncle Cheong's case, he exhibited the

same direct implication on the possession rite because everyone who participated in a possession rite relied on him to decipher, interpret, and translate the god's messages to the public. He relayed those messages and gave instructions. Those instructions, while sometimes customary, could also be new messages that were specific to the current concern of the ritual, such as a new haunting of a site that required the spirit medium's exorcism. Preparations had to be made for the spirit medium to visit the site and Uncle Cheong was also the liaison person and would organise the exorcism.

In other words, the shouts, groans and faces of a spirit medium are not the only signs that announce the presence of a god. The *Zhoutou* is equally important in making the connection between the spirit and the human participants—he makes it possible to understand the god. This is done by organising things in a logical and understandable fashion. The *Zhoutou* makes sense of the codes and signs from the possessed spirit medium, decodes the signs and reproduces them in a systematic way, such as a ritual that has to be carried out by everyone else—kneeling, bowing, praying, offering of joss sticks, etc. These are actions in reaction to the *Zhoutou*'s commands. One can see the chain of command quite clearly from god to spirit medium to *Zhoutou* and to the other temple devotees. A ritual's process should not only be located at the spirit medium, where most of the spiritual activity does indeed occur at, but it is the *Zhoutou* that ensures the safe progression of any ritual and the dissemination of the spiritual message for a wider audience. He or she does not have the ability to be possessed or go into trance, but he or she functions as the crucial link between all participating entities, including the movement and positioning of sacred objects and material offerings.

Uncle Cheong, however, furthers this thesis statement. He, more than other *Zhoutou*s that I observed at other temples, does more than assist the spirit medium. He also documents and records the temple rituals and rites with his camera phone. While he is no longer an

active *Zhoutou*, as he feels he has to pass the role on to the younger generation, he still stands

at the side and records the rituals, and uploads them to his blogs and Facebook page. In my

opinion, he directs the ebb and flow of ritual in more ways than specific to the live event.

Table Talk 3: Crossing Mediums

"I don't actually believe that my camera can capture the spirit. It is really just to keep a

record" (Uncle Cheong). I too do not actually think that the spirit is captured on film when

one records the possession rite on film. Nevertheless, there are implications for this form of

archiving. The personal archive extends the religious to another platform, by which new

audiences can view his documentation. He further posts images of the rituals he performs on

Facebook and they garner some "likes" and comments. Uncle Cheong has four blogs that

document or feature his religious belief:

1. http://dyqiyindian.blogspot.sg/

2. http://andykwa.blogspot.sg/

3. http://huaguoshangong.blogspot.sg/

4. http://roncom.blogspot.sg/

FIG. 3. Screenshot of Huaguoshangong.blogspot.com, a blog Uncle Cheong maintains to
document his temple's events and festivals.

Each blog traces a particular type of religious activity and the one that interests me the

most is the blog website of his temple *Hua Guo Shan Gong*. Uncle Cheong records the

religious events and festivals and represents them as images, narratives and video recordings.

As I scrolled through the blog, I asked myself: how should such representations of a festival

be understood when they reappear in an organised distinction between writing and image?

The blog interface concentrates writing, pictures and videos in a single surface. It

simultaneously refers to the live event already performed, or the god, and "as the presumed

representatives of a spoken word" (Derrida 2004, 137). But once they are forced to represent

the live performance, or the god, they become "mere figurines, masks, simulacra" (Derrida

2004, 137). However, I argue that the Uncle Cheong's Taoist practice produces a double face

of erasure and "posting" (like how we 'post' a blog entry on Blogger.com). Uncle Cheong

gives an account of the live performance, acts as its interpreter or spokesman, but most of all,

he signposts, post-event, the interventions affected on the spirit medium (Uncle Cheong's

godfather). His godfather simultaneously possessed the signifieds: God, Taoism and

Huaguoshangong (花菓山宫) temple, but relies on hybridised or displaced signifiers from a

multitude of sources to perform his spirit possessions. Extending further, Uncle Cheong's

labour co-produces and recreates the scene of the god-human possession, just as violent as it

was when enacted, as it is enclosed, quite literally, in an organised digital interface of figures,

displacements and repetitions (Derrida 2004, 143).

In my analysis of Uncle Cheong's practice, it is possible to adopt a Socratic-Derridian

opposition or difference between "knowledge as memory and nonknowledge as

rememoration, between two forms and two moments of repetition: a repetition of truth

(alētheia) which presents and exposes the *eidos*; and repetition of death and oblivion (lēthē)

which veils and skews because it does not present the *eidos* but re-presents a presentation,

repeats a repetition" (Derrida 2004, 136). Without bleeding in the Taoist signifieds with the

Greek semantics here, the interpretation of the gathering of voices, images and writing is that they perform a horizon of resemblances. The blog highlights the substitutions made between gods, their figures and icons, and the participants that articulate the exchanges between gods and humans. Uncle Cheong's writing, images and videos are homogenous in the sense that all the operations "aim above all at resembling" (Derrida 2004, 138), but they also have some claims to a spiritual essence. The rituals must themselves be manifestations of a god possessing a spirit medium in order for the online re-presentations of those manifestations to be authentic to the live event and to the living spirit mediums.

The godson writes about his godfather, who is possessed by the god. This chain of signification already animates the estrangement from the god, from the truth of the thing itself, from the truth of speech, from the truth that is open to speech (Derrida 2004, 138).

And hence, from the god.

Table Talk 4: Crossing Dialogues

But let us take a step back and reform the thesis based on a Taoist perspective.

Mark Berkson makes the connection between Derrida and Zhuangzi, a fourth century B.C.E Taoist thinker and locates their overlaps at the problem of language (Berkson 1996, 97), even though they come from two distinctly different philosophical traditions. Many modern Taoist scholars have also gained insights by comparing the two of their views on language (See Cheng 1990, 19-30; Chien 1990, 31-49; Xie and Chen 1992, 363-375; Yeh 1983, 95-126; and Zhang Longxi 1992.). Berkson points out that Zhuangzi "objects to…the absolutism of Confucians and Mohists, both of whom appeal to Heaven as the source of their normative visions," and that the two schools of thought "have determined *shi* [是] "right" and *fei* [非] "wrong"…their way is objective, immutable, and applies to all individuals" (Berkson

1996, 101). Zhuangzi counters those views with a relativism that is based largely on perspectivism and language scepticism; the former "describes the relativity of language based on the position of the one using it" while the latter "describes the recognition that all words or claims within a given language system have meaning only relative to other words or claims that they are set against" (Berkson 1996, 101).

Michelle Yeh compares Zhuangzi's concept of relativism to Derrida's deconstruction as both a challenge to dualistic conceptualisation. For Derrida, Yeh writes, "the long tradition of Western philosophy from Plato to Hegel constitutes a single system founded on the concept of being as presence as opposed to non-being as absence" (Yeh 1983, 96). "A dualistic framework," she summarises, citing Derrida in the earlier instance, "dominates and regulates Western thinking with its configuration of numerous concomitant dichotomies: subject/object; inside/outside; substance/form; logos/mythos; reality/appearance; origin/derivation; nature/culture; etc., with the former being the real, the essential, the originary, the superior" (Yeh 1983, 97).

Zhuangzi, in his critique and satire of Confucius[5], plays out a similar language scepticism:

老聃曰："请问，何谓仁义？"孔子曰："中心物恺，兼爱无私，此仁义之情也。"老聃曰："意，几乎后言！夫兼爱，不亦迂乎！无私焉，乃私也。夫子若欲使天下无失其牧乎？则天地固有常矣，日月固有明矣，星辰固有列矣，禽兽固有群矣，树木固有立矣。夫子亦放德而行，循道而趋，已至矣；又何偈偈乎揭仁义意，夫子乱人之性也！"

[Lao Dan[6] said, "May I ask your definition of benevolence and righteousness?"

Confucius said, "To be glad and joyful in mind, to embrace universal love and be without partisanship—this is the true form of benevolence and righteousness."

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[5] Note that Zhuangzi parodies and imagines the conversations between Confucius and his disciples or with other Chinese philosophers in an attempt to subvert them.

[6] Laozi, another important Taoist philosopher and founder of Taoism, is also sometimes known as Lao Dan or 老聃.

Lao Dan said, "Hmm—close—except for the last part. 'Universal love'—that's a rather nebulous ideal, isn't it? And to be without partisanship is already a kind of partisanship. Do you want to keep the world from losing its simplicity? Heaven and earth hold fast to their constant ways, the sun and moon to their brightness, the stars and the planets to their ranks, the birds and beasts to their flocks, the trees and shrubs to their stands. You have only to go along and Virtue in your actions, to follow the Way in your journey, and already you will be there. Why these flags of benevolence and righteousness so bravely upraised, as though you were beating a drum and searching for a lost child? Ah, you will bring confusion to the nature of man!"] (Translated by Burton Watson 2013, 104)

The parallels to Plato's dialogues are uncanny but I believe what is at stake here is how the skepticism of Derrida and Zhuangzi of their respective traditions (Western and Chinese metaphysics) are mediated through the intermediary reiteraters: translators, commentators, philosphers and characters on pages. This interest in 'dialogue' informs my own dialogues with Uncle Cheong for they highlight the distance I had with the subject matter. I become conscious of the fundamental incompleteness of the spirit and human, god and medium dialectic. It led me to search for the dualistic conceptualisations inherent in the language formations of expressing a person whom spirits interact with.

Joan Townsend, for example, has provided a definition based on the work of Å ke Hultkrantz:

A shaman is one who has direct communication with spirits, is in control of spirits and altered states of consciousness, undertakes some (magical) flights to the spirit world, and has a this-material-world focus rather than a goal of personal enlightenment. Spirits may be allowed to enter the shaman's body and speak through him. And he can call spirits to be present at a ceremony. (Townsend 2001, 1)

Also summarised by Brian Morris in *Religion and Anthropology: A Critical Introduction*, he writes that, "[t]he shaman is thus essentially a spirit-medium who serves as a 'bridge' between the 'spirit world' and the world of the living" (Morris 2006, 17-18).

This sympton of which Michelle Yeh calls "the tyranny of metaphysical dualistic concepts" (Yeh 1983, 97) should be further elaborated to carefully tease out the implications of such conceptions in the study of spirit mediums and religious practices. I argue that the notion of relativism built into the logic of representation of Taoist gods is the logic of supplementation: mediums supplement the truth, they never present the whole truth. This is their inherent performative logic rather than a Platonic idea of mimesis. I must add that this interpretation is only possible because of the on-going dialogue after dialogue of successive intermediaries reading and conversing with their predecessors. This insight informs the entire premise of my thesis:

> **For a hermeneutical approach to the study of Taoist deities, mediums and media to work, comprehending what is performed is a concern.**

The Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jacques Derrida[7] encounter in Paris (perhaps around 1981) and their textual "dialogue" inform my thesis's premise, or rather I too focus on the obvious and necessary precondition of the function of language and its translation for any understanding to be achieved in dialogue (Michelfelder and Palmer 1989, 4). While there will always be the apparent scepticism of language to convey meaning, as Zhuangzi has shown, once acknowledged as a precondition, the focus is shifted from a dualistic demarcation to the actual encounter of the duo. The concern is the decisive moment when they gather, perform, re-perform traces and co-perform. When it comes to performance, my thesis is thus this: A

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[7] The public encounter = between Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jacques Derrida took place in April 1981 at the Goethe Institute in Paris on the occasion of a symposium on "Text and Interpretation" organised by Sorbonne professor Philippe Forget (Michelfelder and Palmer 1989, 2).

spiritual performance is only authentically possible when it is mediated and communicated in a sequence;

> If you speak of the Way and not of its sequence, then it is not a way; and if you speak of a way that is not a way, then how can anyone make his way by it? Therefore the men of ancient times who clearly understood the Great Way first made clear Heaven and then went on to the Way and its Virtue. Having made clear the Way and its Virtue, they went on to benevolence and righteousness. Having made clear benevolence and righteousness, they went on to the observance of duties. Having made clear the observance of duties, they went on to forms and names. Having made clear forms and names, they went on to the assignment of suitable offices. Having made clear the assignment of suitable offices, they went on to the scrutiny of performance... ("The Way of the Heaven," Watson 2013, 102)

Performance, thus, is the sequence of dialogues, imagined, authenticated or mediated by a set of co-performers.

The deities must necessarily be obscured by their own multiple reappearances so as to perform their distance and thus their believers' dependence on them. They are removed even as they are perpetually available for possession and worship in the form of statues, figures, human mediums, tokens or talismans. The deities must be more imminent than transcendental or they cannot performatively grant the immediate wishes of their devotees. The disappearance of truth as presence, the withdrawal of the present origin of presence is the condition of all (manifestation of) truth (Derrida 2004, 165). Being-present (Uncle Cheong being-present at the spiritual event) is doubled as soon as it appears: of it not being true and true at the same time; of two men re-expressing the deity's message. That is why no spirit medium can be alone. He is almost always accompanied by a *Zhoutou*. The two men, and their god, are never away from the table; they are never isolated from one another because the relation between god and man demands a chain of mediumship, repeatedly manifesting the god along with the god's disappearance; it is also to ensure and maintain the spirit medium's

link to the human world, requiring finally the *Zhoutou* to bring the spirit medium back from a possessed state.

It is not because one (the god) is more superior than the other in a binary (spirit and human) that a spiritual performance is efficacious and affective. In fact, it is through a medium's medium (Uncle Cheong for example) that any spiritual reality is experienced. The spiritual world provides meaning only in a relational sense, through certain agencies and relations that are formed arbitrarily. Language, or rather the issue of translation in popular Taoist practices, highlights the arbitrary nature of spiritual practices. This point is also contained in Zhuangzi's passages on language:

Words are not just wind. Words have something to say. But what if what they have to say is not fixed, then do they really say something? Or do they say nothing? People suppose that words are different from the peeps of baby birds, but is there any different or isn't there? (Watson 2013, 9)	Saying is not blowing breath, saying says something; the only trouble is that what it says is never fixed. Do we really say something? Or have we never said anything? If you think it different from the twitter of fledgelings, is there proof of the distinction? Or isn't there any proof?[8] (Graham 1981, 52)	夫言非吹也。言者有言，其所言者特未定也。果有言邪？其未尝有言邪？其以为异于鷇音，亦有辩乎？ （《庄子》．齐物论。）

[8] Robert Elliott Allinson cautions us that the two versions have a subtle but important difference. Allison writes, "In Watson's version, the question is raised as to whether or not the meaning of words is fixed. It is not taken for granted that it is not fixed. It is simply stated that if it is not fixed, then we may not raise the question if words really say something or if they do not. In Graham's version, it is stated outright that the meaning of words is never fixed. What is hypothetical in Watson becomes categorical in Graham. From the categorical non-fixity of language in Graham's version, we are much more easily led to the probably conclusion that language is meaningless. In Watson's version, the conclusion is left more up in the air" (Allinson 1989, 16). It is clear from the comparison the role of the translator/interpreter, who in the act of translation, asserts his own interpretative position. It exposes the relativity of different translating positions.

As Berkson puts it, "There is neither a transcendental subject nor a world outside and independent of the text; rather it is language itself that creates, uses, and speaks them" (Berkson 1996, 102). This describes the performativity of language in Taoist practice and the medium vis-a-vis medium relations expose the relativity of different performing positions. Berkson again explains Zhuangzi's most important ideas on language and interprets Zhuangzi's text: "The problem with language for Zhuangzi is that it depends on the perspective of those speaking, the context and the relation to other words" (Berkson 1996, 103).

No doubt my dialogues with Uncle Cheong taught me about popular Taoist practices but they also help to explicate the role of the intermediary. For instance, caught in the moment and intensity of a spirit possession, it was easy for me to think of the god as perpetually there when the medium performs the embodiment and the changes to the body and speech that comes with it. However, Uncle Cheong showed me that a representation of a presentation (such as a blog post) highlights the layers of representation and repetition and draws my attention to how a religious practice relies on mediums to create the presence of a supernatural being, and in doing so also pronounces the ease in which it can disappear. Writing may not be "the living repetition of the living" (Berkson 1996, 137) but it is, for sure, still a repetition by which we can come to know the once lived, the once divine and the conditions by which the divine crosses path with humanity.

The dissertation draws attention to such crossings by emphasising mediums—the creative co-producers of the religious practice. At the same time, those *messengers* of religion are also bound to the immaterial conditions that affect their interpretation of *Shengming* (Chinese: 神明), a generic word to refer to the pantheon of gods. The word *Shengming* teaches us that the light and clarity of a deity must necessarily be mediated through a vessel

(*Ming* can refer to a vessel used to hold offerings to a god). It is also directly referred to the sun god. In Sima Qian's Treatise 28 of the *Shi Ji*, the pantheon of gods have a dwelling place:

《史记·封禅书》：“长安东北有神气，成五采，若人冠綄焉。或曰东北，神明之舍；西方，神明之墓也。

[In the sky northeast of Ch'ang-an a supernatural emanation had appeared, made of five colours and shaped like a man's hat. The northeast is the dwelling place of the spirits… and the western region is where they have their graves.] (Sima 1961, 35)

This imaginary "sky" from the "northeast" is described as both the dwelling place as well as the graves of gods. This, I believe, rather aptly represents the tension between a dwelling for immortals or Heaven, and the deaths of gods and their eternal graveyards. This is an analogy of liveness and presence of gods and the necessary departures that gods make, reshaped as a "man's hat" according to Watson's translation. *Guanwen* (Chinese: 冠綄) however, usually refers to a head-dress meant for a high-ranking official or even the royal crown. In that sense, no ordinary man can mediate the presence of gods because at the core of this mediation is a corporeal practice that performs both the presence of gods as well as the creative interpretation of Taoist traditions, symbols and writing. He or she must be suitably trained and well-versed to perform those requirements. For me, this is also a figurative expression of how I can situate the analysis on popular religious practices at a "man's hat"— a spirit medium's interpretation and calling out of a god from the god's dwelling is represented by the elaborate change of costume while resembling the god.

FIG. 4. Uncle Cheong's Godfather with his crown of colours
Photo: Cheong Yew Soon

Mediums are themselves traces, and every chapter in the dissertation begins with this premise and examines how the traces are performed.

Conclusion: Medium as Trace

> Presence no longer guarantees cultural analysis, and fetish for it can limit imagining of research forms appropriate to context and concern. (Fortun 2011, xiii)

Much of the textual product of this dissertation would be impossible without Uncle Cheong's generous commentary on his practice. Though another large part of my ethnographic writing is based on my own observations and analyses, there remains a tension between the

ethnographer and the research subject. This tension as articulated by James Clifford comes in a form of questions:

1. Who, in fact, writes a myth that is recited into a tape recorder, or copied down to become part of field notes?

2. Who writes (in a sense going beyond transcription) an interpretation of custom produced through intense conversations with knowledgeable native collaborators? (Clifford 2011b, 118)

Citing Derrida, Clifford writes that "the cultures studied by anthropologists are always already writing themselves, the special status of the fieldworker-scholar who "brings the cultures into writing" is undercut" (Clifford 2011b, 118). I would like to add another dimension to the undercutting. What happens when the field-worker is the religious practitioner, who is capable of writing and bringing his or her culture into writing? Uncle Cheong and many others who seek to represent their religious practices online with public blogs and social media write themselves, in two senses of the phrase. They write about themselves as much as they write in their own capacity their statuses as insiders of a religion of which I the researcher continues the co-performance of the deities and the religious practice. Nevertheless, how can an individual alone write his religion with authority, just as how can an academic write with authority about a religious practice that is not his or hers? What is at stake is not the writing authority of individuals but the process of defining the constructions of our textual products. Uncle Cheong with his simple Blogger.com template driven web design shows us the construction quite clearly. At work here is the systematic manifestation of his responsibility to his religious practice: to tell a story the way he sees it. It is an example of Clifford's call to recognise that "allegory requires that as readers and writers of ethnographies, we struggle to confront and take responsibility for our systematic constructions of others and of ourselves through others" and his message to "tell stories we

believe to be true" (Clifford 2011b, 121). Uncle Cheong presents his religious practice, with all its mysteries and the unknown, and inner experiences with pictures, words and video recordings. However, as Clifford correctly points out by quoting Walter Benjamin, modern allegory "is based on a sense of the world as transient and fragmentary" (Clifford 2011b, 119). All my accounts of religious practices written here and in the subsequent chapters are grasped as a process: they inevitably invent new ways to retell themselves, and as present structures disappear, they invite "imaginative reconstruction" (Clifford 2011b, 119). The impulse to redeem the transience of things for eternity (Clifford quotes Wolin, who quotes Benjamin; Clifford 2011b, 119) is to be resisted, "not by abandoning allegory—an impossible aim—but by opening ourselves to different histories" (Clifford 2011b, 119). One of those different histories is the micro-narrative of the individual, or his or her allegorical device.

Performance Studies scholar Diana Taylor argues that "[s]ome scholars turn to cultural studies and no longer limit themselves to the examination of texts, but their training in close readings and textual analysis might well turn everything they view into a text or narrative" (Taylor 2003, 27). Dwight Conquergood critiques middle-class academics and thinks that they "blithely assume that all the world is a text because texts and reading are central to their life-world, and occupational security" (quoted in Taylor 2003, 27). To write about religion is to perpetually deal with the tension of revealing one's own position and hermeneutics. At the same time, one has to rely on text, either through reading, writing, or speaking to retell one's experience.

This dissertation offers a third possibility of writing about religion. The dissertation calls into attention both allegorical devices that exist within the religious practice studied as well as the embodied practices that performance studies privileges. It takes seriously what Taylor calls "the repertoire of embodied practices" and acknowledges it as "an important system of knowing and transmitting knowledge" (Taylor 2003, 26). However, I must differ

slightly on this emphasis on embodied practices as if they operate without literary codes. Of course, language and writing does not stand for meaning itself (Taylor 2003, 25) but I reaffirm, as do scholars who still rely on the written form to present their research, Roland Barthes's assertion that "everything that has meaning becomes a kind of writing" (quoted by Taylor 2003, 26).

The exemplary figure of Uncle Cheong operates as an example for the dissertation, the textual product, and allows it to speak of the researcher relation with the research material. When Uncle Cheong found the language to speak about his practice, it was not about the tool that Uncle Cheong confers on to speak—it is I argue about what Giorgio Agamben calls the "hollowed-out form" that the religious practitioner must always assume in order to practice. Here I cite Agamben:

> The decisive element that confers on human language its peculiar virtue is not in the tool itself but in the place it leaves to the speaker, in the fact that it prepares within itself a hollowed-out form that the speaker must always assume in order to speak—that is to say, in the ethical relation that is established between the speaker and his language. (Agamben 2011b, 71)

Uncle Cheong himself assumes the "hollowed-out form," which I prefer to call a medium. He assumes and fills the medium with his expressions of "cosmological" patterns, fables of personal identity, in his colloquial mix of English, Mandarin and Hokkien, and models of temporality (forms that Clifford explored too) and his technological tools. He rewrites his religious practice as much as I do. In writing and allegorising his deity, layering the presence of his deity with material objects and digital imprints, there can only seem to depart further from the truth or identity of his deity. At the same time, the practice demands the departures because it surpluses it with an excess of presences, in forms and persons willing to resemble and replace the gods, or what I call "supplements" to borrow Derrida's term, that substituted for the absent origin (Derrida 2004, 164).

Therefore, it is still too soon, too ill-advised to cast text and narrative aside, if it still remains our habitual practice to conceive and construct our understanding our own world in words. More than anything, religious practices such as those I shall cover in this dissertation combine all possible human methods of construction—text, narrative, scenarios of theatre, gestures, bodily movement, etc.—to present themselves to the stories and gods they believe in. As such, it also discovers the necessity of supplements and the role of mediums to perpetually substitute for the absent signified. The paradox is thus established: a deity's presence can only be manifested by its absence, mediated through the presence of a medium. When I have recourse to a god, it acts as my schematic vessel, where material performance makes contact with spiritual beings.

In a field of religious studies, scholars like Jean DeBernardi, pieced together the anecdotes and vignettes of individuals to constitute a coherent whole of the social reality of the religious community. The individual disappears into the paradigm. The individual disappears from the broad analysis. Perhaps it is time to take the individual seriously?

However, to take the individual seriously, i.e. to give it centre stage also presents a problem—how can an individual represent the universal or the totality of the religious practice? The answer is I cannot and should not attempt to articulate the universal (Derrida 2006d, 365). However, my relationship with Uncle Cheong and his godfather has brought about a particular possibility of interpretation. He circulates the religious knowledge into new forms, embodied by different participants of the practice.

I am the next interpreter, the translator and the messenger of Uncle Cheong's words and practice. To those who decided to pick up the practice, Uncle Cheong becomes a reference point for the practice to proliferate and persist. To academics before me, individuals also provide the means to reinterpret and make connections that individuals on their own could

not make or are too intricately tied to their practice and their community to form the critical distance necessary to study themselves, their practices and motivations.

The core focus of the research is the study of mediums: mediums as trace, and medium across medium, as information, data, and codes pass from one medium to another. Its main research questions are: When mediums perform and mediate, what is altered? What gets imprinted? What remains and what is lost? The focus for me is not about the origins of practices but the circulation and the entities that make possible the circulation. Within those topics of discussion, the usual suspects for analysis return: language, translation and structures. The key difference, however, is that I am focusing on how they circulate and change when in performance, as if they are in trance and must inevitably be reconstituted in a new *becoming*, ready to perform one's converged form over and over again. At the same time, each time a religious space is conceived, it takes on specific expressions and metaphors that may be useful to the general analysis. For example, the temple of Uncle Cheong and his godfather performs a pharmaceutical theatre, where the metaphors of supplements, theatre and pharmacy are re-performed by my writing:

> This pharmacy is also, we begin to perceive, a theatre. The theatrical cannot here be summed up in speech: it involves forces, space, law, kinship, the human, the divine, death, play, festivity. Hence the new depth that reveals itself to us will necessarily be another scene, on another stage, or rather another tableau in the unfolding of the play of writing. (Derrida 2004, 143)

Eventually, the case studies I present in the next chapters are generally theatre, and are theatrical, in that they involve the same things mentioned above: "forces, space, law, kinship, the human, the divine, death, play, festivity." For me, though, it is also the coming together of human and non-human actors, and traces, in another scene and on another stage of human performance.

"If you have any more question, feel free to whatsapp me or Facebook message me."

Chapter 3

Corporeal Gods: Performing Excess, Country and Corporeality in a

Pharmaceutical Theatre

> When the image is new, the world is new. (Bachelard 1994, 47)

Uncle Cheong's godfather, Mr Wu is a spirit medium for the Monkey God. The Monkey God

is understood to have chosen Mr Wu to be his mediator and vessel, whom the god directly

communicates with. Expanding on the previous chapter and the personal experience of Uncle

Cheong, this chapter focuses on the human actor and body as a medium. Mr Wu's rituals of

healing and house visits to exorcise spirits involve intermediaries to evoke the image of the

Monkey God, and consequently provide means to harness his powers for the purposes of

healing, exorcism and general blessing. The ritual performances that Mr Wu enacts involve

technology, objects and other mediums, from which waste and excess are always produced

during and at the end of the performances. What the 'excess' suggests is a complex

relationship between the objects of religion and the god—on one hand religious items

(talismans, offerings, incense paper, joss sticks and holy water) represent a celestial world

and a method of connecting to that world, on the other hand they reveal themselves as wholly

material and degradable.

The Singapore context presents a multifarious performance of religious intermediaries

that form traces, even as they enable an interaction of cultures and practices. In the preceding

chapter, I talked about a medium as a trace. In the case of popular Taoist practices a medium

appears as a trace because the practice ceases to be the same as the original. My access to the

Taoist practices is an access to traces of practicing Taoism that its predecessors have left for

its current participants and observers to decipher and react to. The trace is, to reiterate

Jacques Derrida, "the difference between Beings and beings, the very thing that would have been "forgotten" in the determination of Being as presence, and of presence as present—this difference is so buried that there is no longer any trace of it" (Derrida 1982b, 65). Derrida's concept of trace comes to fore when he considers the relationship between Heidegger's texts and the Greek metaphysics texts, and between presence in general. In my opinion, it is also a reiteration of Emmanuel Levinas's efforts to ground metaphysics on ethics or the proximity of the other, instead of constructing an ethics based on pre-conceived notions of metaphysics.

This chapter, however, is not a discussion on ethics and the debates on Being and beings. They informed my theoretical framework but I must differ slightly on the emphasis on reading. Derrida's focus in "Ousia and Grammé" seems to be on the relationship between texts, when he writes "the trace inscribed within the text of metaphysics, a trace that continues to signal not in the direction of another presence, or another form of presence, but in the direction of an entirely other text" (Derrida 1982b, 65). Nevertheless, Derrida provides a way to understand 'trace' as an adventure that goes within and beyond a play of structures. In "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourses of the Human Sciences" he remarks:

> The function of this center was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure—one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure—but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the *play* of the structure. By orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of a structure permits the play of its elements inside the total form. And even today the notion of a structure lacking any center represents the *unthinkable* [My emphasis] itself.
>
> Nevertheless, the center also closes off the play it opens up and makes possible. As center, it is the point at which the substitution of contents, elements, or terms is no longer possible. At the center, the permutation or the transformation of elements (which may of course be structures enclosed within a structure) is forbidden. (Derrida 2006d, 352)

Returning to "Ousia and Grammé" one can read in the essay that the 'unthinkable' is mentioned too: "the sign of this excess [here Derrida is referring to thinking beyond the closure of two—structure and play, absence and presence] must be absolutely excessive as concerns all possible presence-absence, all possible production or disappearance of beings in general, and yet, *in some manner* it must still signify, in a many unthinkable by metaphysics as such… The mode of inscription of such a trace in the text of metaphysics is so unthinkable that it must be described as an erasure of the trace itself. The trace is produced as its own erasure" (Derrida 1982b, 65). Derrida, however, assures us that it is not contradictory to *think* the 'unthinkable' because to begin with, "[p]resence…far from being…what the sign signifies, what a trace refers to… is the trace of the trace, the trace of the erasure of the trace" (Derrida 1982b, 66). It is also not contradictory to think of "together the erased and the traced of the trace" and to examine the presencing of traces. In this case, I refer to those traces as the performances, practices and rituals, and ultimately they are those that we can come into contact with in the present. Trace, then, follows an adventure, a journey, as trace of a trace and its erasure. "In absolute chance," Derrida affirms that "affirmation also surrenders itself to *genetic* indetermination, to the *seminal* adventure of the trace" (Derrida 1982b, 66). Trace is, in the broadest sense, a sequence of its tracing.

The adventures I trace in this chapter affirm the distinction between gods and human beings, as something quite forgotten but nevertheless unveiled itself within the simultaneous appearance of both gods and their mediums. This is an Heideggerian concept, which guides how I approach the study of religious practices, i.e. via the traces left behind:

> However, the distinction between Being and beings, as something forgotten, can invade our experience only if it has already unveiled itself with the presencing of what is present (*mit dem Anwesen des Anwesendem*); only if it has left a trace (*eine Spur geprägt hat*) which remains preserved (*gewahrt bleibt*) in the language to which Being comes. (Heidegger, "The Anaximander Fragment" 51 quoted in Derrida 1982b, 66)

The study of traces and intermediaries in religious practices begins with an examination of the excesses of performance produced in acts of religion. As the chapter progresses, the Monkey God, or rather the traces of him will reappear in several incarnations and forms. His appearances have no true and single origin but the excess produced in rituals marks him and his images as a unique product of Singapore cross-cultural hybridising. This ritual process continues to feed into cultural imagination in new media platforms.

Acts of Religion and Healing

Popular Taoist practice offers a conceptual framework of religion that is realised in communities that utilise possession rituals and healing processes. Taking cues from Gerald James Larson's work on "The Concept of Body in Āyurveda and the Hindu Philosophical Systems" in the edited volume *Self as Body in Asian Theory and Practice* (1993), Florian C . Reiter (1992) and Tara L. AvRuskin's "Neurophysiology and the Curative Possession Trance: The Chinese Case" (1988), this research elaborates on the nature of spirit possessions for the purpose of healing. In Singapore, it is still possible to observe possession trance practices, those that AvRuskin describes:

> [P]ossession trance plays a major role in healing practices in a large number of societies. In many of these societies individuals may lapse into a trance which may be regarded as caused by the possession of an evil, supernatural entity. Healers then utilize supernatural possession as a means of determining the etiology of the patient's ailment and as a means of treatment either through instructions delivered from the spirit in a strange dialect or through rites of exorcism during the trance. (AvRuskin 1988, 286)

Apart from 'a strange dialect' and 'supernatural possessions', included in the analysis of possession performances are medicines and religious objects. Spiritual possession ulitises

those objects, which may assist in the trance (of a spirit medium), or aid the "exorcism of an evil" (of a patient).

Some working definitions are needed to elaborate on spirit possession as practiced in Singapore. Spiritual possession is generally defined by Erika Bourguignon as a person being "changed in some way through the presence in him or on him of a spirit entity or power, other than his own personality, soul, self or the like" (Bourguignon 1976, 8). Bourguigon broadly defines spirit possession into two types: "possession trance" and "possession." Possession trance is expressed in altered states of consciousness; in possession, such trance states are absent (Bourguignon 1976, 8). Emma Cohen in "What is Spirit Possession? Defining, Comparing, and Explaining Two Possession Forms" notes that Bourguignon's tidy descriptions were "widely criticized for their failure to capture the complexity, variability, and polysemy that characterise actual representations of possession on the ground" (Cohen 2008, 102). Cohen argues that possession forms resist being pinned down to a singular, one-size-fits-all definition and that cultural phenomena, such as the subject matter in this chapter have "very specific, unique, culturally-embedded qualities of possession phenomena in their local contexts" (Cohen 2008, 102).

An older definition of "Taoist sorcerers," cited in Mircea Eliade's seminal work on *Shamanism* (2004 [1964]), perhaps locates possession phenomena in their respective local contexts. In the chapter on "Symbolism and Techniques: Tibet, China, the Far East," Eliade describes man as being able to "rise to higher spheres and descend into the lower … that intelligent *shen* [Chinese: 神] descended into him" (Eliade 2004, 453) Citing H. Maspero's Taoist term for ecstasy, *kuei-ju*[9], which H. Maspero[10] thinks can only be explained by

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[9] The use of the Giles-Wade framework for the transliteration of Chinese characters is highly problematic. From the word *kuei-ju*, I can derive several misleading Chinese characters. The closest I can get is "鬼聚," which loosely meaning the gathering of ghosts but I believe that Eliade is describing a broader sense of spiritual entities, which would include souls, ghosts, demons and gods.

[10] Maspero, H. *Les Religions chinoises, 34, 53-54; La Chine antique, pp. 195 ff.* Quoted in Eliade's *Shamanism* page 453.

deriving the Taoist experience from the "possession of sorcerers," Eliade's overall project

theorises techniques of ecstasy in a wide range of cultures and shamanistic practices. Specific

to China, he describes that the spirit medium or shaman experiences a "magical flight," an

"ascent to heaven," or a "mystical journey" as he or she is possessed (Eliade 2004, 452-453).

While this project also stretches itself too broadly and thus thinly in the many examples of

shamans, it is still worthwhile to note a few significant aspects of Taoist spirit mediums that

Eliade raises. First, he recognises the potential of a Chinese influence that has contaminated

ancient local magical traditions. The possibility of contamination is a significant one,

especially in the Singapore context that I will illuminate in the course of this chapter and

beyond. Second, the purpose of his project was always only to note the presence of a

considerable number of shamanic techniques throughout the course of Chinese history

(Eliade 2004, 456). It is a broad survey and is not meant to be an in-depth study of any given

shamanistic practice. Last, the identification of the *Tao shih* (*Sai kung*) or a Taoist doctor

who is particularly known for being an exorcist, also serves a similar function that my

research subject, Mr Wu Dadi performs as a temple medium. The key difference is that while

the Taoist doctor "generally uses a medium, who goes into "a state of delirium" (Eliade 2004,

456), Mr Wu often goes into a possessed state and he performs multiple roles: doctor, spirit

medium, priest, temple leader, and exorcist.

Two salient questions are raised by Emma Cohen when defining possession trance:

"What, if anything, unifies what appear to be recognizably cross-culturally, recurrent features

of our pseudo-analytic concept of 'possession'? What, if any, are the criteria by which one

might assess the comparative utility of a study of 'possession' in one part of South East Asia

for the development of an understanding of possession phenomena in another part of the

region?" (Cohen 2008, 102). The focus on a small country, Singapore, and further into an

even smaller apartment, converted into a temple dedicated to the Monkey God may not allow

a comparative research of spirit possession in the region. Nevertheless, the research field presents a cross-cultural type of possession that expresses a "religious, philosophical and cosmological syncretism … informed by Confucianism, Buddhism, ancestor worship, spirit mediumship and other aspects of folk religion that have their roots in the Southern Chinese provinces of Fujian and Guangdong, where the forbears of many Chinese Singaporean originated" (Rae and Lim 2010, 177). The chapter aims to develop a particular understanding of spirit possession as practiced by the individual temple medium, which has further implications on our understanding of hybridised spiritual practices in Singapore. Emma Cohen has two working definitions that can be useful to opening the question of a medium's body and the direct interaction with spirit entities:

> Pathogenic possession concepts result from the operation of cognitive tools that deal with the representation of contamination (both positive and negative); the presence of the spirit entity is typically (but not always) manifested in the form of illness.
>
> Executive possession concepts mobilise cognitive tools that deal with the world of intentional agents; the spirit entity is typically represented as taking over the host's executive control, or replacing the host's 'mind' (or intentional agency), thus assuming control of bodily behaviours. (Cohen 2008, 3)

From a theoretical viewpoint, the act of spirit possession has also to do with the body's performance and performativity and not just the operation of cognitive tools. I too look at both "pathogenic" and "executive" possessions. The key addition to those perspectives, though, is that I recognise that the assumed control of bodily behaviours by a spirit entity has to negotiate with the corporeality of the human body. "Chosen" by a god, as Uncle Cheong explains, Mr Wu is given the powers to conduct healing rites. If the medium is directly chosen, what the medium performs would be ineffective. And because Mr Wu is recognised by his community as a 'chosen' medium, he is sought after as the mediator between a devotee and the Monkey God. In some cases, Mr Wu has to look into 'pathogenic possessions', i.e.

involving a sick person who has been haunted by a spirit, and attempt to exorcise the spirit from the sick person.

This directly touches on the concept of embodiment. Catherine Bell usefully polarises two views on the construction of the body in relation to ritual. First is the approach of asking "*how ritual shapes the body*" and by making the body "the object of social action," Bell considers this approach as invoking embodiment in its passive sense (Bell 2006, 538). The second approach is a logical alternative to the first: "*how the body shapes ritual*" or as she puts it, "how ritual is the expressed language of the body, a medium uniquely able to communicate messages, perform experiences, and create environments that are impossible with other media (Bell 2006, 538). There is a third approach, one that arose from the limitations of both approaches. Bell finds it apt to call this approach a "discursive or performative approach" and it is one that most informs my approach. One of the key theorists on performativity is Judith Butler, where she draws most from Jacques Lacan's notion on repetition to theorise her concept of performativity. Butler argues that it is "not simply a matter of construing performativity as a repetition of acts, as if "acts" remain intact and self-identical as they are repeated in time … an act is itself a repetition, a sedimentation, and congealment of the past which is precisely foreclosed in its act-like status … an "act" is always a provisional failure of memory" (Footnote 7 to "Introduction" of Butler 1993, 244). Elsewhere, she writes that "the performative is not only a ritual practice: it is one of the influential rituals by which subjects are formed and reformulated" (Butler 1996, 160).

I would like to add a supplementary note on Butler's footnote on Derrida's notion of iterability. When Butler makes use of the Lacanian notion that "every act is to be construed as a repetition, the repetition of what cannot be recollected, of the irrecoverable, and is thus the haunting spectre of the subject's deconstitution" (Butler 1993, 244), it contradicts Derrida's simple stance of "side-stepping" from Jacques Lacan. Derrida, in *The Sovereign*

and the Beast, writes that "ritual practices … associate the experience and that of the effacing of the trace." To Derrida, "to trace comes down to effacing a trace as much as imprinting it" (Derrida 2009, 130). To reinforce this, he reminds us that "it is just as difficult to assign a frontier between feint and feigned feint, to draw an indivisible line through the middle of a feigned feint, as it is to distinguish inscription from effacement of the trace" (Derrida 2009, 130). The more important but more generalised question, and avoiding the pessimistic and irretrievable effacement of traces that Butler suggests in her theory of performativity, is how an animal/god (the Monkey God) shares the power (speech, reason, institution, technique, clothing, traces, hand signs, just to name a few and almost indefinite) with man. Derrida further questions this right of power by asking, "whether what one calls man has the right, for his own part, to attribute in all rigor to man, to attribute to himself, then, what he refuses to the animal, … Thus, even supposing *concesso non dato,* that the "animal" is incapable of effacing its traces, by what right should one concede this power to man, to the "subject of the signifier?" In short, it all comes down to Derrida's insistence that "the trace cannot be effaced" (Derrida 2009, 131).

These fluid and ubiquitous acts of imprinting and effacement draw the conclusion that "it is in the nature of a trace that it always effaces itself and is always able to efface itself." Derrida further argues that anybody, God, man or beast, is not the master or sovereign subject and cannot have the power to efface it as its disposal (Derrida 2009, 131). What is generally observed then for my case study of Mr Wu is the constant reiteration of god and man with their imprinting and effacement. Mr Wu does not repeat alone—his predecessors and the other present spirit mediums who also embody the Monkey God elsewhere—and thus need not necessarily deconstitute himself. In corporeal terms, Mr Wu, with his eighty year old physicality, presents very specific conditions for the 'replacement of the host's mind' because it is not only the mind that is replaced but the god has to replace his body as well.

Furthermore, the god finds himself in Singapore, away from his original habitat, *Huaguoshan*

as indicated in the novel, *Journey to the West* (Chinese: 西游记). It can be equally possible

that instead of an "ascent to heaven" (Eliade 2004, 452) on the part of the mediums, it is as

much about the descent to earth-Singapore-temple. Mr Wu's practices reveal how they

"hover on the blurry boundary between formal religion and informal domesticity" (Bell 2006,

541). Mr Wu is a medium as trace: imprinting tradition as he performs the gestures and rites

of old and altering the practice as he ages and as he reinvents the traditions to suit his

situation.

Singapore's Monkey God at a Void Deck

FIG. 5. Temple Signage, "花菓山宮" (*Huaguoshangong*).
Photo: Alvin Lim

To begin my research on spirit possessions, I again contacted Uncle Cheong. He kindly

agreed to bring me to his temple to observe and record the temple rituals. His temple is

tucked away in a three-room flat in Singapore. The temple is called 花菓山宮 or *Huang Guo*

Shan Gong (Flower-Fruit Mountain Palace) and is dedicated to Sun Wukong, the Monkey

God.

Sun Wukong, the Monkey God is known as a fictional character in the 16th century novel, *Journey to the West* or *Xiyouji*, written by Wu Cheng-en. Sun Wukong is a disciple of Xuanzang, a historical person from 7th century China who travelled to India on a pilgrimage. More precisely Chang Ching-erh notes that the novel is not the "achievement of one single genius, but the product of an accretion of resources, contributed by writers and artists of different periods" (C.-e. Chang 1983, 191). Hera S. Walker further points out that "the existing monkey legends and tales that circulated orally throughout central China provided a foundation on which corrupted and distorted fragments of the Rama saga could be added. By the time the extant *Xiyouji* was written, Wu Cheng'en had a large oral tradition to draw upon for his epic-novel" (Walker 1998, 80). Physiologically speaking, the Monkey God is part monkey, part human. Geographically speaking, he lives neither in the celestial realm nor on earth with humans. Rather, he is known to reside on a magical mountain, high above the clouds. He travels wide and far, and supposedly travelled with Xuanzang to India to bring the Buddhist scriptures back to China. He could be a Hindu god or a Chinese deity but more importantly, as a character, he connects locations and people together, moving the plot along—he functions as a mediator between humans, gods and demons. He is a protector of the weak and his master, but he is also a destroyer, attacking gods and demons that come in his way. In other words, while the identity of the Monkey God is ambiguous as a signified, its liminal state presents many possible religious interpretations and practices as the character is able to change shape and travels across geographies, cultures and religious narratives.

At *Huang Guo Shan Gong*, however, the Monkey God is a true and divine being to the devotees. The temple's name is derived from the mountain paradise that Sun Wukong created for himself and his monkey minions. Recontextualised by Uncle Cheong's godparents to a state-built three-room flat at Bendemeer Road, Singapore, the temple sits alongside flats

belonging to families of different religions and ethnicities.[11] In fact, Uncle Cheong's godmother tells me that her neighbour deliberately disturbs her in the morning and pours filthy water in front of their house/temple. The temple's existence upsets the neighbour but it is also indicative of the balance that the Singaporean society has tried to maintain and the tensions that can arise when a diverse spectrum of religions and cultures co-exist. The temple repeats the narrative of the mountain paradise that belongs primarily to monkeys and generally does not sit well with celestial beings and humans. In a similar sense, the sharing of spaces in a public housing area does present situations that put human relationships to a test. Though I have just highlighted an example of a conflict, there are still examples where religious tolerance is possible. For example, on the day I first visited the temple, I noticed a Malay wedding being held at the 'void deck' (the ground level of the block)—another typical example of how religious beliefs and cultures in Singapore have to share limited space. Not far off, temple members burned their incense paper for the gods.

FIG. 6. Uncle Cheong takes a picture of the burning ashes of joss paper.
Photo: Alvin Lim

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[11] The Ethnic Integration Policy was implemented in 1989 by Singapore's Housing Development Board (HDB). It was done "to ensure a balanced ethnic mix across HDB estates and to prevent the formation of racial enclaves. There was a revision of the policy in 2010 and the "maximum ethnic limits" were raised for the "Indians and Others" ethnic group/category. The limits for a single block of HDB flats are Malays at 25% (of occupants), Chinese at 87% and Indians & Others at 15% ("Policy Changes To Support An Inclusive And Cohesive Home"). Accessed on 28 October 2014.

The void deck is a peculiar space. It is not exactly 'void' but it is a space demarcated by pillars of a building. It is a public space and members of the public can use it to organise events such as what is known as block parties. They are organised by residents or a residents' committee as an occasion to promote community spirit and for Members of Parliament to interact with residents who voted them into Parliament. The void deck is also a space for funerals (of all religions) and weddings. It is a low-cost venue for those activities and it is relatively easy to set up the space for events. The void deck is the ground floor, where people move through and depart and where sewage pipes and cables are visible; it is also where people gather to smoke, have conversations late into the night. More recently, it is where surveillance cameras are installed by the police. It is also the closest space to where they burn incense paper and present their offerings to spirits during the Hungry Ghosts Festival. As such, it is also known to be "dirty" in every sense of the word. Funerals held at the void deck are often avoided by the Chinese. The void deck is considered a pathway for spirits to enter houses because they will have access to all levels of a building from the void deck.

The 'void deck' symbolises the built reality and spatial integration of diverse ethnic groups and religious communities in Singapore. For the Monkey God to take root and proliferate in a public space, it has deep implications on the social fabric. There is a "violent sundering" to borrow Jacques Derrida's term, "from all the supposed resources of a force held to be authentically generative, sacred, unscathed, 'safe and sound': ethnic identity, descent, family, nation, blood and soil, proper name, proper idiom, proper culture and memory" (Derrida 1998, 56). There is nothing 'safe and sound' when Uncle Cheong and Mr Wu burn their incense paper on the concrete floor—it is considered an act of vandalism if

incense papers are not burned in designated burning containers or areas. They did not entirely

adhere to the rules, and burned their joss paper directly on the concrete floor.[12]

There is also nothing 'safe and sound' in the 'uprooting' of gods or 'proper religion'[13]

(See Chapter 2.). But more than ever, gods disperse and divide themselves, and one of them,

the Monkey God arrives at Mr Wu's temple. This sense that the gods are dispersed and

divided, or what Paul Rae and Alvin Lim describe as coming "from elsewhere – from another

'place' and from multiple spiritual sources" is central to the dramaturgy of Mr Wu's practice

(Rae and Lim, 2010, 177). Taking root at this place (the void deck and public housing

apartment) the 'god of elsewhere' must negotiate their new place—a mountain paradise

becomes a three-room flat, the Monkey God becomes a Hokkien Chinese, and the concrete

floor becomes a temporary offering altar. A theatre space emerges out of these

transformations and interactions, where practices take root temporarily and yet repetitively;

and where gods follow the idiosyncratic traits of the community. The 'void' is not a true

emptiness but provides a gathering locus for a local practice to assimilate the 'proper'

practices from "elsewhere" and redefine the practice into a local form. The 'void' is also a

space where people briefly gather or pass by to get to their apartments or out, and where their

vehicles are parked neatly at carparks just beside the 'void deck'. Bodies come and go, in a

highly choreographed manner, where the structure of the building dictates flows and pauses.

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[12] At the National Environment Agency (NEA) website, the following FAQ explains the public regulations: 1. The public must clean up the place after they have made their offerings. When burning joss-papers, candles, etc. they should use containers. Residents in town council estates should make use of the burning pits and containers provided by the town councils. 2. To minimise problems when burning joss-papers, candles, etc., the Government introduced the following control measures on 1 March 1998: Joss sticks shall not exceed 2 metres in length and 75 mm diameter. For large joss sticks up to 2 metres in length and 75 mm in diameter, no more than six may be burnt at any one time. Candles shall not exceed 600 mm in length. For large candles up to 600 mm in length, no more than two may be burnt at any one time. The burning of large joss sticks and candles shall not be within 30 metres from any building. Accessed April 14, 2014. http://www.ifaq.gov.sg/nea/apps/fcd_faqmain.aspx#FAQ_31167

[13] See chapter two on an anecdote on Uncle Cheong's own mishap when a statue of a god at his family altar was not properly placed when the god was invited back to his home.

The negotiation of ethnic and religious differences is extremely pronounced at a void

deck and a private temple (as opposed to large popular temples around the country). While a

flat image of the Monkey God can be easily evoked in big festivals such as Thaipusam (see

below), when the Monkey God appears in flesh through Mr Wu, the disparity between

tradition and modern Singaporean living is clearly highlighted. What it does is that the

performances of the Monkey God hint at the ancient origins but they ultimately perform the

spirit medium and devotees' present understanding of and relation to the Monkey God.

FIG. 7. A juxtaposition of Kavali carrier, Thaipusam and
Mr Wu, Sun Wukong Birthday Celebration.
Photo: Alvin Lim (left); Mr Cheong (right)

The image (left) above shows the portrait of the Monkey God, a common image evoked

during the Singaporean Thaipusam festival. The image on the right is Mr Wu, in trance,

performing the Monkey God. By showing the two references side by side, one can be misled

to think that the same Monkey God is evoked in the two practices. As mentioned, Hera S.

Walker traces in detail the integration of foreign elements into the Sun Wukong myth and

there are debates on its Indian origins, as well as comparisons to Hanuman, the monkey general in Ramayana. But it can be further said that the integration makes it impossible to neatly classify all the integrated components and sources.

The image of the Monkey God in the Thaipusam festival is a visual representation of the distortion of the monkey image, at once collapsing into a synthesis of the Monkey God signified from Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism. There is also no supernatural possession during Thaipusam, where the Monkey God possesses a person. In the specific 'void deck' context, though, the image of the Monkey God breaks away from those origins and two-dimensional pictures, and presents itself as living, physical, and wholly deferred from the Hindu Hanuman or the literary Sun Wukong. At the void deck, the difference from the proper origins is further highlighted, but the practice also becomes more immediate and specific to Mr Wu's embodied presence of the Monkey God. It can be argued that the many images of Monkey God, whether syncretised or fragmented, find their articulation in the excesses of performance, always taking shape in different bodies, forms and objects in a theatrical 'void' space.

Excesses of Performance

"Religion is this long effort and this anguished quest: It is always a matter of detaching from the real order, from the poverty of things, and of restoring the divine order. The animal or plant that man uses (as if they only had value for him and none for themselves) is restored to the truth of the intimate world; he receives a sacred communication from it, which restores him in turn to interior freedom.
The meaning of this profound freedom is given in destruction, whose essence is to consume profitlessly whatever might remain in the progression of useful works. (Bataille 2007, 57-58)

In *Theory of Religion*, Georges Bataille figuratively destroys a table to illustrate the futile instance when an object is destroyed in an intimate moment, presumably to establish a temporary relation with a divine god. He writes, "[i]f we are to preserve the movement of the economy, we need to determine the point at which the excess production will flow like a river to the outside. It is a matter of endlessly consuming—or destroying—the objects that are produced" (Bataille 2006, 103). While the theory of spirit possession and popular Taoist practice requires less of a theory of violence, a general theory of destruction is still useful to the current discussion. In Bataille's terms, the "sacred is exactly comparable to the flame that destroys the wood by consuming it" (Bataille 2007, 53). In the objects used during Taoist possessions, this comparison of the sacred to the flame finds realisation. The objects of talismans, medicines, incense paper, paper money, and joss sticks (to name a few) are excessively produced, only to be later destroyed by fire. The mass production of those religious objects are excessive because it is "profitless" (Bataille 2007, 58) in economic terms. However, moving away from Bataille's theological underpinnings, popular Taoist practices in Singapore point to the restorative qualities of excess. When considered as restorative, even curative, Mr Wu's practice reveals a complex performance of restoration, cure and destruction. This argument further requires a few theses and working definitions, and here is the first one, brutal[14] and useful at the same time to clarify the nature of the spiritual practice and the performance of excess:

Thesis I: Excess as a product of spiritual practice

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[14] In "Des Tours De Babel" Derrida reminds us (about theses of translation) that the simplification of experience can be brutal and limiting but theories persist and offer entry points into understanding a subject matter, e.g. translation (Derrida 2007a, 203-204).

Talismans, medicines, incense paper and joss sticks are used for the purposes of both the healing process as well as to enact a spiritual passage. These objects are mass produced and repeatedly used by Taoist practitioners. They inevitably disintegrate, by way of performance, as they are expended during a ritual. While they break down through material processes, they also suggest a symbolic link between physical and metaphysical realms. Our contact with the metaphysical, a priori, can only be made with and through those materials. The exchange and change of states are manifested through the progress of the material from a copy to a residue, at once suggesting both realms in one figurative stance, usually through fire. They are burned and literally destroyed. These objects play a crucial role in the healing rites and they are applied directly to the rites and to initiate the healing rite.[15] Devotees and patients often pray to the god with joss sticks and may continue to do so at their own family altar at home. The talismans, given after the session, are physical evidence of the invocation made to the Monkey God and can be worn next to, put under the pillow, or burned into ashes and added into a glass of water. The patient then drinks the water (even a sip will do) as part of the cure.

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[15] A similar practice or "drama of cure" can be observed in Jacalyn Duffin's book on *Medical Miracles: Doctors, Saints, and Healing in the Modern World*. She writes about the application of relics and images of saints and would-be saints in the healing rites in 17th century Europe. "Like the other relics, images were applied directly to afflicted body parts. In 1601, a miraculée in the cause of Loyola placed his picture directly on her stomach. Images were also laid on foreheads, mouths, chests, knees, tumors, sores, and wounds. They were made as gifts, hung on walls, placed on beds, clasped in hands, suspended from belts, worn next to the skin, and, yes, even prayed to. They lingered as physical evidence of the invocation" (Duffin 2009, 161).

FIG. 8. The spirit medium's table.
Photo: Alvin Lim

The drama of cure is usually performed at the spirit medium's table. One of the reasons for

sickness and thus the need for cure is because an evil spirit has possessed either a person or

the person's house. The evil spirit prevents the medicine from taking effect to relieve the

patient—most clients usually visit a medical practitioner first. If the client fails to recover

after a long time, he or she suspects that there are spiritual reasons for this. The client then

visits a spirit medium to find out the spiritual cause. This is a unique collapsing of belief

systems where Western medicine and Traditional Chinese Medicine are supplemented by a

spiritual form of healing. If there is a spiritual cause, this revelation is carried out in trance by

the spirit medium while seated before the medium table. The medium table embodies the

gathering of systems, in a figurative sense, where a medium (a doctor or a spirit medium)

interprets the signs (or symptoms), makes notes and prescriptions and affirms the belief that

the suggested antidote will relieve the symptoms. The chair is a crucial site of beginnings. A spirit medium begins his possession seated on the chair. In a rest position, the medium receives the spirit and begins his transformation. It is also where the patient sits next to the spirit medium (an image that we are familiar with when we visit a General Practitioner's office), as a prescription is soon given during the possession.

The Pharmacy: Spiritual Prescription

During spiritual healing, the spirit medium and his assistant asks the client what his or her purpose is in seeing the spirit medium, such as asking questions about one's health, wealth, prosperity or safety. One can ask the spirit medium questions for oneself or for someone else, either present or non-present at the ritual. Uncle Cheong calls those visitors "clients" because at the end of a session, the client will offer a red packet of cash—the amount can be determined by the client or the temple. This particular temple sect, however, believes that the client should decide on the amount as the onus is on them to prove their sincerity to the god. It is in fact very rude to ask the spirit medium how much to pay him or her.

In his human state, the spirit medium first learns about the client's predicament. He then proceeds to intercede on the client's behalf and invites the Monkey God to speak directly with the client. Once possessed, Mr Wu will provide the diagnosis and perhaps the cure as well. A deity can be called upon to address a concern or to perform a rite for an important day, ceremony or celebration. The spirit possession described here applies only for patients who come to the spirit medium for various cures. I am focusing on the ritual that addresses clients who could be suffering from an illness and it is usually diagnosed as having

a spiritual cause. The two main causes could be: The "client" has offended a god or evil spirit, or there is an evil spirit that haunts the person without any obvious reason.

I must add that the interactions between the client and the deity are performed in Teochew, a dialect that I do not speak but can partially understand because it sounds similar to my dialect, Hokkien. The speaking of Teochew during possessions suggests that the deity, Sun Wukong is Teochew and speaks perfect Teochew. An interpreter becomes extremely important during the interaction. He (Uncle Cheong usually performs that role as he speaks Teochew, English and Mandarin well) listens to the spirit medium explain the cause of the ailment or disease while possessed by the Monkey God. Because this is usually said in dialect and may not always be coherent, the interpreter has to translate it into Mandarin for the client. If the message is not comprehensible, because some of it may be whispers or simply does not make sense, the interpreter has to deduce what the message may be and retell it to the client.

Uncle Cheong admits that there have been times when he could not understand part of a message but because the cause of the client's ailment has been established, and the cure is commonly known, he is still able to decipher the message and give instructions to the client based on his knowledge and experience of similar cases. The interpretative role that Uncle Cheong plays complicates the role of Mr Wu as a spirit medium. With Mr Wu already mediating the Monkey God's instructions, Uncle Cheong adds another layer of interpretation and gives in excess the knowledge needed for the cure. Mr Wu has never disagreed with Uncle Cheong's prescriptions but it does raise the question about the authenticity of the god's original message. Uncle Cheong clarifies that he is still guided by Mr Wu and the prescriptions are informed by his own study of Chinese medicine. This, however, exemplifies how a spiritual performance can often be layered with interpretation over interpretation; an interpretation of interpretation. But the analysis goes further: the layering over the original meaning of the god's message, lost in translation, has in fact secured the faith that a believer

has in the relay of messages. To be sure, while the god is immediately next to the client-patient-believer, what Uncle Cheong does in effect is to re-establish the distance from the god, and it is only through a privileged proximity that one can act a mediator and interpret the message on the patient's behalf. Because this theatre is immediate does not mean God is even closer, more interior or more domestic to the believer. Instead, it reaffirms the role of mediums, layering over the spirit entity and providing access to it.

The table and the chairs provide the stage for spiritual diagnoses and interpretation. It is where the spirit medium, in trance, informs the client seated next to him, what he knows about the patient's ailments. He prescribes an antidote, one that is not quite the cure for the physical symptoms in a medical sense. Instead, Mr Wu goes to what he perceives as the root of the problem, a spiritual one, and advises the patient to perform a set of rites at home:

1. Burn a piece of talisman stamped and signed by a possessed Mr Wu. Add the ashes to a cup of water and drink the water.

2. Burn another piece of talisman and add it to a pail of water which should contain a branch of willow leaves and/or fresh flowers, such as orchids that can be found in local markets. They must be colourful and fresh. Wash yourself with that pail of water.

At this juncture, the patient has to show absolute faith in carrying out the rites at home in order to ensure full recovery. Again, the assistant plays an important role because the instructions are translated by the assistant. As mentioned, Uncle Cheong deciphers the message, sometimes he even has to guess it, and later writes down the instructions in a note and passes them to the patient. He is also the one who passes the "medication" (talismans) to the patient. In some instances, Mr Wu is also able to prescribe traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) to the patient. In expert fashion, Mr Wu as Sun Wukong instructs the patient the amount and type of Chinese medicine to consume with the talisman water. The assistant

writes down the names of the herbs and gives the prescription to the patient. Uncle Cheong clarifies that the act of prescribing only happens for simple illnesses and symptoms, most of which are symptoms such as fever, coughing, sore throat, and stomach upset. Uncle Cheong had to learn the Chinese characters for the TCM and when he acts as Mr Wu's assistant, he writes the names of the herbs down in a note.

At first impression, I observed that there is a difference between the religious healing practice Mr Wu performs and his everyday life. Later, when unpossessed, Mr Wu had walked to a nearby pharmacy and bought Panadol (a brand of Paracetamol painkillers) for his wife's headache. This particular incident suggests the ease by which Singaporean Taoists shifts between positionalities. The Taoist believer is able to separate the respective medical practices—Mr Wu does not need a spirit to tell him that painkillers can help his wife's headache. At the same time, I later realised that for Mr Wu and his family, one's spirit and body are thought of in equal emphasis, without separation, and must mutually affect the overall health of the body. Hence, when a patient is sick, the causes are always more than one (either spiritual in nature or medical) and the cure is always a form of a "combination drug" consisting of talismans, water and drugs. The combined medication given by the spirit medium must go hand in hand with the other prescriptions that a patient is accustomed to receiving, particularly in a Singapore context where a clinic can be found not far away from a temple.

The exploration of excess in performance introduces the second thesis in this chapter: the excesses that are produced in and through performance establish the spirit medium's orature, which is in turn a repertoire that is determined by the corporeality of the spirit medium.

Thesis II: The corporeality of the spirit medium shapes and is shaped by the "orature" of the spirit medium

The term "orature" is quoted in Joseph Roach's *Cities of the Dead* (1996), who cites Kenyan novelist and director, Ngugi wa Thiong'o. For Roach, Performance Studies "complicates the familiar dichotomy between speech and writing" by introducing concepts that fuse dichotomies such as "orature." In practice, speech and writing are hardly distinguishable—to the outsider, the speeches are undecipherable and the writing (on talismans) are unintelligible. They are performed simultaneously or in sequences that make sense in an overall religious logic. A spirit medium's "orature" comprises of "gesture, song, dance, storytelling, proverbs, gossips, customs, rites, and rituals, and are nevertheless produced alongside or within mediated literacies or various kinds and degrees" (Roach 1996, 11). At the centre of spirit possession is the spirit medium's body, at once performing the acts of performance and mediating between god and man.

Roach also writes, "orature goes beyond a schematized opposition of literacy and orality as transcendent categories; rather, it acknowledges that these modes of communication have produced one another interactively over time and that their historic operations may be usefully examined under the rubric of performance" (Roach 1996, 11-12). To a large extent, I also studied Mr Wu's "orature" and observed that it is produced by an ongoing communication between man and god as they interact over time. It is precisely time that alters the mode or presentation of the communication (between god and man). The physical practice of spirit mediumship highlights that possession is first and foremost a corporeal experience. Therefore, it is important to pay equal attention to a body that weakens, falls ill, is not always acting intensely, but may sometimes even be relaxed and casual. Those moments of supposed rest and weaknesses are in fact just as influential to the practice as the

traditions and customs of Taoist philosophy or teachings. In short, the body performs the

"orature" and as Mr Wu ages, the question hangs on whether his "orature" can remain;

whether his performance goes on.

The Spirit Medium's Body

FIG. 9. A hanging photograph of Wu Dadi in his temple.
Photo: Alvin Lim

The above picture shows the temple medium, Wu Dadi (吴大弟), when he was young.

Being eighty years old this year, he has since significantly cut down on the more physical

practices such as the one shown in the picture (the axe drew blood when he hacked it into his

back). Presently, Mr Wu receives his temple devotees or clients in his flat. This channels the

reception of the clients into a narrow space—from the outside world in which clients meet the

dangers of spirit possessions and diseases to the safe temple space, where a client encounters the Monkey God through Mr Wu's body. There are several levels of hosting: Mr Wu's body hosts the Monkey God; the temple hosts the gods and all the participants in the temple; the public housing hosts the temple. The first host (that of Mr Wu) is considered here. When performing the necessary possession ritual before a client, Sun Wukong possesses him each time and he becomes the host. This is most usually practised in front of the spirit medium's table, which is next to the main altar.

It is physically challenging for an eighty year-old body to be possessed by the Monkey God. When possessed, spirit mediums of Sun Wukong are known to perform acrobatics such as high jumps, flips, cartwheels and turns because, to begin with, a monkey is agile. Margaret Chan, in her monograph on *Tang-ki*, *Ritual is Theatre: Theatre is Ritual* describes that spirit mediums possessed by the Monkey God portray him as "funny and mischievous because Monkey always hid his superior martial skills behind mischievous poses, many of which have become iconic on both Chinese opera and *tang-ki* stages" (M. Chan 2006, 53). Although the image of the Monkey God has been distorted and displaced, what recurs is the added physical demands of being a Monkey God medium, as compared to other gods. A healthy and fit body is usually required to perform such acrobatics. Although Mr Wu has been a practicing spirit medium for more than forty years, the rituals he performs now have to be less physically demanding than those he performed when he was younger. He has since decreased the regularity of his rituals because of the physical demands but on all important occasions such as the birthday of Sun Wukong, he will still carry them out.

I must add that Mr Wu is still very fit and healthy for his age. He still participates in pain-inducing rituals such as slapping burning joss sticks on the naked torso, as observed from videos taken by temple members. The scars from previous corporeal mortifications are visible and I notice them whenever he stands near me. Perhaps the regular physical exertions

have built up Mr Wu's stamina and endurance over the years and that could be the reason for his good health and fitness. But the more important point here is that though the virtuosic acrobatics are lost, they are replaced by equally effective and performative interventions that suggest the appearance and embodiment of the Monkey God. Mr Wu's act of hitting himself with burning joss sticks perform a possessed man in trance, and manifests the presence of god, who protects him from the flame. While he burns himself with the flame and in a way self-mutilates, he affirms himself as a god's medium, transforming the void deck or temple space into a lived space that is spiritual and sacred.

Spirit possessions, as Mr Wu's case suggests, alter the physical attributes and capabilities of the human mediums. When possessed, Mr Wu moves quicker and is constantly alert and ready to perform a trick or two as the deity. Possessions enable spirit mediums to perform beyond their human capacity. Uncle Cheong states that it is only during those heightened states, that the god addresses the clients via the medium. He says, "My godfather will go into trance, then you immediately know the god is here." There are several key observations that determine that Mr Wu has been possessed:

First, his eyes close partially.

Second, he whispers a short chant.

Third, he inhales, sucking in his belly and raising his chest, utilising what Michael Saso translates as the "lower cinnabar field" (242) or what Taoists call *Da Tian* (丹田) for the performance of a physical act.

He lifts one arm to the front, signifying the stance of the Monkey God as a martial arts general (See Figure 10).

FIG. 10. Mr Wu, moments before his possession as he poses
his stance of the Monkey God, 2013.
Photo: Cheong Yew Soon

The hand sign is called *dao zhi* (Chinese: 道指) which is a basic Taoist hand sign used

for inviting gods for possession. The right hand, with a slight bend to suggest a scratching

movement, signifies the arrival of the Monkey God, who is commonly depicted to scratch his

golden fur. As Margaret Chan describes, the spirit medium of Sun Wukong "affects the

simian-like behaviour used by Chinese opera actors in the role" (M. Chan 2006, 12).

The *dao zhi* hand sign is an ambivalent sign. Mitamura Keiko traces the developments

of "Daoist Finger Techniques" from late Tang to Song dynasty. It was clear in her citations

that "in the early stages of Daoism, hand signs were used in conjunction with spells, or

incantations, and talismans to afford protection and exorcise evil" (Mitamura 2002, 245). The

crucial distinction between Buddhist mudras and Taoist hand signs, as she concludes, is the

difference between the left and right hands:

In Buddhist mudras, the right hand is seen as the pure and the left hand as the impure one. This order of things is completely reversed in Daoism, in which the left hand, being of *yang* nature, represents cosmic purity. (Mitamura 2002, 253)

The distinction is a crucial one. Mr Wu's main hand sign is gestured with his left hand, suggesting a Taoist origin. However, according to Mitamura Keiko, when there is an exerting of thumb pressure against certain fingers, it suggests that it has been inspired by a Buddhist model of static mudras (Mitamura 2002, 247). Apart from this, the actual origin of the hand sign is not clear to me as Uncle Cheong gave a simple answer when I asked whether the hand sign is from a Taoist scripture or inspired by Buddhist mudras: "Since my time this [hand sign] has always been done like that." Uncle Cheong spoke about his childhood contact with the Monkey God possessing his godfather and always recalled the particular hand sign his godfather would do. "It came naturally to him when he was in a trance," he further added. The persistence of the hand sign is significant, in my view, as a demonstration of the "creative misunderstandings" that Poul Anderson gives an account of when he writes about the Taoist rituals of performing priests of the *jiao* liturgy in Taiwan (Anderson 1995, 191). In the first place Mr Wu's practice omits Taoist ritual texts, and there is no priest to initiate his possession. That radically contradicts the Taoist conventional structure of including both the priest and the spirit medium during an important ritual.[16] Mr Wu alone performs the "transformation of the body," as Anderson calls it. On further probing, Uncle Cheong explains the Monkey God liturgical practice has always been passed down from one generation to another, which Mr Wu and his parents brought with them when they emigrated from China. No written or print record is available for comparison of hand signs. This is similar to Anderson's conclusion that a structural change (to a Taoist ritual) occurs on the

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[16] For example, in the next chapter, spirit possessions during the Nine Emperors Festival includes both the priest and the spirit medium.

basis of "an interpretation by the performers of ritual themselves of the meaning embedded in the ritual structure" (Anderson 1995, 202). This places further emphasis on the spirit medium to be the interpreter and performer of the incantations and hand signs, thereby initiating the transformation of his body. As Jean DeBernardi puts it, "the trance performance involves the skilful improvisation of one or more characters, and the spirit medium's personal transformation in speech and movement is convincing proof to the audience that a god is truly present" (DeBernardi 2012, 125). Therefore, my observation of Mr Wu's possession differs largely from those that Margaret Chan describes:

> At the start of the ceremony, the medium sat impassively upon an ornate wooden throne flanked by musicians and ritual assistants and watched by a circle of onlookers. The first sign of imminent possession was the medium's restlessness evidenced by his shifting in his seat. This discomfiture soon developed into a heaving of the chest as the medium begin to retch. Saliva dribbled out of his mouth and fell onto squares of spirit money … The medium's right leg began to twitch and then to tremble convulsively. His eyes closed as his head began to sway from side to side. (M. Chan 2006, 11)

In contrast, Mr Wu's possession is more collected and there is a certain composure shown. This may be explained by his forty years of experience compared to the youth described in Chan's account. He is familiar with the possession and the necessary steps to invite the god to possess him. The four actions—the semi-shut eyes, the whispering, the inhaling and the stance—also shows a difference from Chan's description, where the young spirit medium manifested a more outward performance of his possession. In my view, Mr Wu's transformation process reveals an inward focus, where the medium conjures and collects within himself the image of a possessed state. The stance (in Figure 10) announces the god's presence. The more the medium associates himself as the god, or vice versa, the more the external body manifests this internal association—there is no real separation between god and human for the medium. What we see in the above image is an external

expression of spirit possession as well as the internal passage of human to god. One can thus

observe that Taoist spirit possession is an agglomeration of knowledge, physical action, and

the imagination. The physical action reproduces knowledge based on previous possessions,

either performed by him or his predecessors. This first hand sign transforms to the next 'V'

shaped hand sign made with his index and middle fingers (See Figure 11).
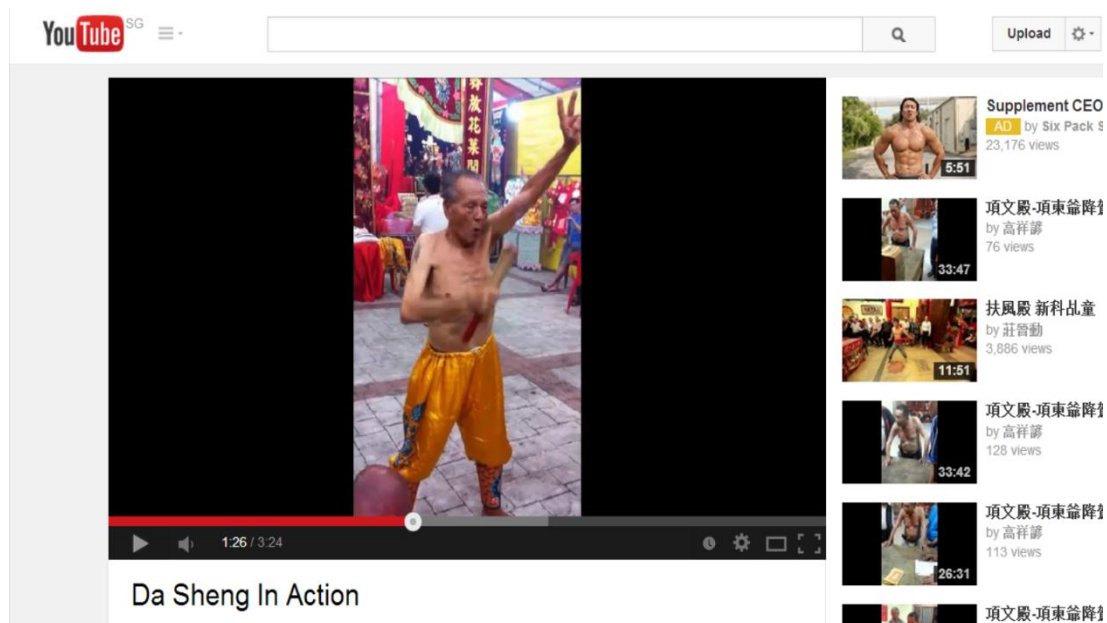
FIG. 11. A possessed Mr Wu, and the 'V' hand sign; Screenshot of YouTube
video uploaded by Uncle Cheong.

Again, the hand signs demonstrate Mr Wu's personal and creative interpretation of

Taoist liturgy, often mixing hand signs from different contexts. It is more accurate to note

that the development of hand signs and their sources are hard to be determined, as Mitamura

Keiko points out. Instead the focus should be on the performativity of the hand sign, assigned

to a specific talisman that the spirit medium hands out and the incantation he or she chants.

More importantly, the progression of hand signs indicates the progression of the

transformation in a sequence predetermined by the god possessing Mr Wu.

The possession of a god contains various layers: it is the replication of one's inner

image of a god as much as the persistence of previous Taoist techniques passed down from

one generation to the next. The differences in how mediums manifest the possession already demonstrates the interpretative and personalised nature of possession performances. It is also the enactment of spiritual knowledge that one learns from tradition. To act as a god is not simply to pretend to be god or that the god is with the spirit medium. It is the gathering of obscured sources, invisible forces, traces, images and symbolic visions, which are reproduced in the moment of spirit possession. A spirit possesses man but man also possesses the spirit. He brings upon the god image his own human attributes: his face, body, spirit, personality or physique. The spirit-man as a joint entity engages in a practice that has no true return to an origin but nevertheless must refer to one. Multiple origins inform the ritual, just as the Monkey God has multiple origins. The Monkey God can transform into different shapes, sizes, characters and forms. He can also make copies of himself, by plucking a strand of his hair and it can transform into a replica of him. In one story, a monkey demon pretends to be Sun Wukong and deceives the human master. No one could recognise who the real Monkey God was until Buddha exposes the fake and Sun defeats the demon in a battle. A spirit medium for the Monkey God when possessed thus echoes the multiple transformations and multiplications of the Monkey God. A spirit medium of the Monkey God could very well be expressing one of many versions of the Monkey God.

The Sun Wukong I witness in this temple cannot be said to be same Sun Wukong I witness in another temple. Every individual reproduces the spiritual sign and symbolic vision in one's own image, body and spirit. Thus, every spirit medium has his or her physical limitations and no matter how the god has supposedly imparted superhuman strength to the medium, there are still limits. The limits affect the communication and association between the god and human, the spirit medium and patient. The internal passage is only fleetingly visible in the gestures and movements of the spirit medium who is in trance. It is also impossible to prove whether a god has possessed a medium or not; or whether it is a feigned

feint. My purpose however is to study how an internal association, i.e. the communication between a spiritual vision (a god, an energy, or a spirit) and the possessed subject, is produced interactively and in tandem with the human body. The human subject that acts, jumps, gestures, speaks, stands and sits, reproduces the god in performance while being conscious of himself. As Uncle Cheong explained to me, even when in trance, the spirit medium remains conscious to his actions though he still submits to the god's will. That consciousness is required because the spirit medium ultimately responds to the devotees and clients and addresses them in performance.

Much of the earlier two theses reflect on how the spirit medium's body hosts the god. A larger landscape or host can be extrapolated from Mr Wu's exemplary body, which is also the supposed centre. In this section I have already shown how the hand signs and the external display of possession differs from body to body, medium to medium. What I am next describing is the formation of an interface.

Thesis III: The corporeality of the spirit medium vis-à-vis images of god results in an interface (a host of hosts)

The interface produced by the meeting of bodies and images is a significant one—it is the common boundary of bodies, spaces and phases, in an embodied interaction. It is also a reflection of the unique status of Singapore, at once multi and inter -cultural, and where public spaces are often shared for religious purposes, along with communal and social ones. It also hints at the computing jargon, of crossings of pages, platforms and media. More specifically, in the practice of spirit possession of the Monkey God, an interface can be observed to be formed by the temple medium, Mr Wu and the temple altar. His interface presents a fusion of tradition, symbols, religious and medical beliefs. Instead of

"contamination" as I mentioned earlier in Eliade's project, I prefer to see it as interfacing, which brings about its difference and deference from its origins as they come face to face. Each gathering of codes and images at Mr Wu's interface results in an idiosyncratic rendering of the codes and images. While it can be argued that the interface is primarily Mr Wu's body, the interface connects to his surrounding nodes, where the body relates to other persons, sick and possessed bodies, subjects and objects.

The thesis recognises the unique identity of the Monkey God and his relationship with the spirit medium. While Eliade describes Taoist shamanism as an "ascent to heaven" or the "magical flight," suggesting a more transcendental state of possessed mediums, I find Mr Wu's possession more rooted and grounded by his corporeal reality and his immediate surroundings. In realising the embodiment of a god, a Taoist spirit medium can be said to perform the classical Chinese alternative to what Roger T. Ames calls the "final, dualistic distinction between creator and creative," which is "a polar continuum: human being in realizing himself is deity." Quoting Mencius, he translates:

> The admirable person is called "good." The one who has integrity is called "true." To be totally genuine is called "beautiful," and to radiate this total genuineness is called "greatness." Being great, to be transformed by it is called "sageliness." And being sagely, to be unfathomable is called divinity. (Ames 1993, 161)

The agency of Mr Wu, in my opinion, extends beyond being a supposed Confucian sage. He has more immediate and 'executive' functions to perform. Nevertheless, the statement that "human being in realising himself is deity" is extremely important in distancing the thesis from Eliade's framework of ecstasy. Ames best explains this: "These ritual practices are not simply standards of appropriateness, sedimented within a cultural tradition, that serve to shape and regulate its participants. They have a significant and often overlooked creative dimension. What distinguishes ritual from law or rule or principle as a

source of order is that ritual practices not only inform the participants of what is proper, they also are performed by them" (Ames 1993, 153).

Mr Wu exemplifies Ames's notion of "realising himself" as a deity, i.e. the Monkey God. That moment or realisation is a cognitive experience as well as a physical embodiment of the Monkey God. In that sense, the Monkey God is not a transcendental entity, far away in the heavens and unreachable, but is readily available to those whom the god has chosen as a medium. The onus is on Mr Wu to realise the god, and as such, any realisation of the god is well and truly centred on him as the spirit medium—and that alone is sufficient in proving that the Monkey God exists within Mr Wu, at least for the devotees. Having established himself as the Monkey God, he interfaces with the various mediums, each with its own function and endowed with the god's spiritual essence. Not far from him, a figurine of the Monkey God sits on the altar, performing the same embodiment of the spiritual essence.

Next, Mr Wu writes his signature (as Monkey God) on a yellow paper and finishes the talisman by stamping it red with a unique seal. Without his signature or direct interaction with those objects, they would remain as mere objects. His performative acts render them as spirit mediums, and he becomes the host by which those mediums receive meaning, purpose and power. But more importantly, Mr Wu unconsciously re-enacts the confluence of signatures and marks of Chinese talismanic writing[17]—a field that is till today still a difficult terrain to trace. James Robson attempts to make a case for talismanic writing in Chinese Buddhism, which is often omitted and deemed exclusively a Taoist endeavour (Robson 2008, 134). To summarise the efficacy of the talisman, he writes:

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[17] See Robson, "Signs of Powers: Talismanic Writing in Chinese Buddhism," 135-138 to see the many possible origins of talismanic writing in China. Robson quotes from several sources to show the early functions of talismans. See also Mark Edward Lewis. 1991. *Writing and Authority in Early China*, 29. Albany: SUNY Press; and Seidel, "Imperial Treasures and Taoist Sacraments," 310-315; John Lagerwey. 1985. "The Oral and Written in Chinese and Western Religion," in Religion und Philosophie in Ostasien: Festschrift für Hans Steininger, ed. Gert Naundorf, Karl-Heinz Pohl, and Hans-Hermann Schmidt, 301-321. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann.

> Written talismans, by virtue of their unique position somewhere between the "legible" and "illegible," between the "spirit world" and the "human world," served as mediums for communication with (or control of) the realm of demons and deities. Talismanic script could express or illustrate ineffable meanings and powers that defy transmission by traditional modalities of communication: oral or written. Talismans were sacred images that mirrored the forms of the primordial energies at the inception of the world and were therefore imbued with a spiritual power drawn from an ability to share in the essence of the thing it names or represents. (Robson 2008, 138)

The more significant point that Robson makes a case for is that Talismanic writing (and I would also include hand signs) is not an exclusive activity for Taoist practices. One of the reasons why it is so difficult to determine the individual religious sources is because the spirit medium refashions the sources into his personal marks. Mr Wu hints at them through performance as the body displays the virtuosic act of being possessed. Most of all, the incorporeal interacts with the corporeal body when it possesses the body.

> But what's the touching of the incorporeal and the body? Necessarily, this has to do with a certain interruption of the one by the other. The incorporeal is necessarily interrupted when it touches on the body, and the body is necessarily interrupted, or open, when it touches upon, or as soon as it's touched by, the incorporeal. (Nancy 2008b, 125)

I believe it is precisely the indeterminable aspect of spirit possession that makes the discourse of body in spiritual practices challenging. Jean-Luc Nancy calls the body a "grain" or "labyrinth" (Nancy 2008b, 107). To an extent I concur with him that the body-god possession is not a dialectic but presents a maze of sorts. When god and man meet in the body, where time and space coagulate in flesh, spirit, blood, sweat and spells, there is a palpable presence that makes the body differentiated from itself. This can only be observed through performance and through the efficacy of the spiritual acts that the spirit medium

performs in trance. This fundamental difference makes possession trance a unique expression of Mr Wu's relationship with his god, his physical transformation and the ability to perform mortification and physically demanding acts specific to the Monkey God. In that sense, the drama of cure serves as proof of his spiritual possession and also his duty to his community, and to the other bodies that need their god to provide cure and restoration in abundance.

Thesis IV: The Spirit-man interfaces to a larger landscape

In connection with thesis III, the interface of god, his medium and the sick person extends itself to comment on the larger landscape. Pathogenic possessions and executive possessions within Mr Wu's small temple space connect the temple to other spaces, landscapes and interfaces that Mr Wu reflects on and is part of. The body and country are linked in symbolic ways, which in turn have direct implications on the social fabric of Taoist Singaporeans. Mr Wu's practice reveals the wider landscape that consists of many belief systems, both state influenced and passed down by traditions. It is also an interface created by several intercultural interactions within a country's cultural and social landscape.

Kristofer Schipper explains the Taoist belief that "The human body is the image of a country" in his book *The Taoist Body*. This metaphorical 'country', as Schipper suggests, "reflects the interdependence of the human being and his environment" and "Taoism's fundamental teaching that favors the interior over the exterior" (Schipper 1993, 101). This favouring of the interior over the exterior is further expressed when he writes, "[o]ne obtains the inner vision by looking within, by turning the pupils to the inside and keeping the eyes half-closed to let in light from the outside. The eyes not only relay light from the sun and the moon, but also are considered to add their own luminous energy, so as to become themselves the sun and the moon of the inner universe" (Schipper 1993, 105).

Instead of favouring exclusively the interior over the exterior, I argue that Mr Wu's

rituals of spirit possession, body cleansing rites, and house cleansing (where evil spirits are

driven away from one's house) are also external expressions with the purpose of restoring the

client's body from a pathogenic possession. At the same time, it affirms the intricate

connection of the body to his or her immediate environment, where one comes into contact

(and perhaps gets possessed without trance) with spiritual and biological pathogens. Spiritual

possession is about maintaining a passage, an association or a link for the god in Mr Wu's

body to react to the present and immediate world. This is usually most poignantly expressed

when a patient-client visits the spirit medium. The spirit medium connects to the spiritual

realm on the patient's behalf, and also connects to the patient's body and house as possible

sites where they possessed by pathogens and spirits.

One of the reasons why I situate the spirit medium as a central figure in my analysis is

because a Taoist medium is often described as the focal point of spiritual transformation, and

the Taoist body can experience fundamental changes such as having the ability to "relay light

from the sun and the moon" and "become themselves the sun and the moon of the inner

universe" (Schipper 1993, 105). Schipper's descriptions explain the notion of having Taoist

sages who, with half-closed eyes, could look within themselves and peek into a supposed

inner landscape. This landscape or *Neijingtu* (Chinese: 内经图) describes an environment

that hosts spirits, energies (or *Qi*), buildings, living and non-living things and the symbolic

vision sees passages, frontiers, boundaries, and transitory spaces, as well as links between

lands, rivers and lakes. Where air and water flow, spiritual energies flow there as well.

Recalling my earlier description of Mr Wu's spirit possession, Mr Wu half-closes his

eyes, letting light in from the outside, before he makes the spiritual transformation.

Resonating with Schipper's description of the Taoist body and half-closed eyes, Mr Wu's

half-closed eyes can express an inner state, but in my view it is also a corporeal manifestation

that a god has taken over. The god has to also see outside with a pair of man's eyes. The body follows the guidance of the god but there is also a customary process that is always followed through from start to end, i.e. the four actions—the partial closing of his eyes, the chanting, the inhaling and the hand gestures—that I have described earlier. In this sense, it again demonstrates how it is also Mr Wu who possesses the Monkey God, for it is as much the act of man being transformed into a god as it is a god transforming into a man—god takes on human form.

I suggest looking at the Taoist inner landscape because it redefines our relation with our environment. If the body is understood as a country, what it at least means is that the human body is highly dependent on the environment to function. By looking inward, the gap between god and human is shortened and less transcendental but more immediate, as the spirit medium relies on his or her own body to manifest the god externally. The outside world is as influential (to one's health and welfare) as the inside symbolic vision. Religious practices need not only be analysed externally, i.e. as an event, a performance or repertoire of rituals. There is also a symbolic dimension to a religious practice, which in turn is the result of a prolonged period of interpretation and reinterpretation through practice and renewal.

The Taoist chosen symbol is the *Yin-Yang* (Chinese: 阴阳), which is also found in the inner landscape. It is usually the centre-piece within the eight Trigrams (see Chapter 4 for more details). It is also found in Mr Wu's spiritual practice, and constantly represented in his banners and talismans. However, the meaning behind the Taoist symbol is not truly explained in practice; its full meaning (as expressed by *Lao Zi* for example) is lost. But the symbol stays because of tradition. When I asked Uncle Cheong about the inner landscape and the Taoist symbol, he told me quite frankly that Mr Wu and him do not necessarily follow the ancient texts and execute a precise *Yin-Yang* and Eight Trigrams system, much less the *Ming-tang* or inner landscape or "relay light from the sun and the moon" and "become themselves the sun

and the moon of the inner universe" (Schipper 1993, 105). What is more important for them is the efficacy of their practice and how they can help their devotees to solve their immediate problems. What this emphasises is that local and popular religious practices have lost the direct connection to an ancient belief system. What has taken over are unspoken rules and techniques redeveloped and resolved in performance.

The metaphor of the body as a country provides terms to discuss popular Taoist practices as an extension and deference of the symbols. They reveal a meaningful mechanism but they also reveal how meanings are altered. As a symbolic vision, the body is conceived as an open and flexible space, a country with its own environment of pathogens, toxins and remedies. But as spaces, it also comes with its boundaries that can be crossed and shifted as the body reacts to foreign bodies. If we begin to see symbolically, i.e. metaphorically look inward, the world becomes a bigger place, and thus draws people to develop and redevelop their own systems to cope with the unknown.

FIG. 12. The main temple altar with the figures of gods; the central figure is the Monkey God.
Photo: Alvin Lim

FIG. 13. Main icon of Xuanzang, the Monkey God's master,
along with the demi-gods from hell.
Photo: Alvin Lim

Already we see that the temple altar performs an array of deities with diverse possible

origins. This literal gathering of gods informs the thesis that it is possible, at least from the

Taoist practitioner's point-of-view, for gods of different religions and places to gather and

take their seat at the altar.

Important demi-god figures are also included in the altar, separated by an upper and

lower strata, namely heaven and hell. It is however interesting to find *Xuanzang*, the Monkey

God's master in the literary novel, worshipped at the altar alongside the demi-gods of hell.

This proves the almost casual manner that figures are included into the sacred realm.

DeBernardi, when explaining how humans become gods, writes that "[t]he Chinese popular

religious pantheon is not systematized, but people discuss a rich array of supernatural beings,

including saints (*sin, shen*), who are humans who achieved sainthood by means of virtuous

behaviour, deities (*angkong*), immortals (*sian, xian*), Buddhas (*Hut, Fo*), Bodhisattvas (*Pho-*

sat, *Pusa*), and Lohans" (DeBernardi 2012, 84). The long list of supernatural beings immediately shows the constitution of gods from an array of sources and traditions. Gods are shared, lineages are mixed and spaces are shared. When a believer prays to the altar, he or she immediately affirms the pantheon and subscribes to its interculturality. Mr Wu, for example, prays to the *Tian Gong* or Sky God before praying to the altar of gods and demi-gods every day. This performative and repetitive gesture opens up a direct sphere of influence, at once focusing the gods' influence within the temple house and acknowledging their reach beyond the house. Worshippers and devotees come and go, but they leave with the knowledge that they have established contact with the gods in the temple and bring with them, through the talismans they bring home, physical evidence of that contact.

The whole landscape of gods, which is symbolically reproduced at an altar as a line-up of gods' figurines, informs a patient of the possible spiritual connections to a sickness. It also acknowledges that a house can be a host for spiritual beings. A spirit medium is consulted for healing and the Monkey God can determine if a patient body or one's house has an intruder; if one is a host to a pathogenic possession.

Patient's House

Taoist healing in Singapore includes a spiritual reason for disease; thus there are also multiple ways to remedy it. A Taoist spirit medium can not only be a spiritual healer, he or she can also be a general practitioner of herbs and simple cures. When all else fails, the spirit medium may be required to visit the patient's house to eradicate the root cause of the illness, which could possibly be the inhabitation of a spirit in the patient's house.

A patient's visit to a spirit medium can be understood as an intrinsic desire to correct a destabilised factor, where a foreign substance has infiltrated the 'country'. It may also be

understood as a patient being assailed by an evil spirit who blocks all Western medicine from curing the weakened body.

While the house can host gods, the house can also house spirits that afflict the host. The patient's house can be understood as an extension of the patient's body. Depending on how water and air is circulated in the house, a person receives his or her necessities through those channels. Here, the focus is primarily on *Qi* (Chinese: 气) as a spiritual energy. As explained by Uncle Cheong, when a spirit inhabits a person's house, it deprives the house of *Yang qi* (Chinese: 阳气) as ghosts and spirits are generally understood as being *Yin* (Chinese: 阴) entities, and they immediately affect the overall balance and harmony of *Qi* in the house. As explained in *Dao of Chinese Medicine,* Donald E. Kendall explains this fundamental understanding: "Ailments do not occur unless the body is invaded by external pathogenic forces or functionally impaired by internal factors that cause derangement of the yin-yang balance. Disharmony of yin and yang suggests that one quality is excess or deficient, manifesting as cold or heat syndromes: excess yang properties generally produce heat syndromes of the excess type; excess yin qualities usually produce cold syndromes of the excess type" (Kendall 2002, 249). From a spiritual perspective, exorcism rites are carried out to drive the spirit away either from the human body or the house and re-establish the *Yin-Yang* equilibrium. But the analogy is close: that the human body falls ill due to spiritual forces ties in well with the fact that the human body can become a host of pathogenic entities (bacteria, virus, fungus, and etc.).

This crucial understanding of yin-yang equilibrium and the destructive forces of having in excess or in deficiency of either one of the forces informs the role of the spirit medium. Mr Wu has to re-establish the equilibrium, either by increasing the yang energy in the house or in the person body. Evil spirits or ghosts are considered to be of the *yin* energy. So the mere exorcism of the evil spirit or ghost will be sufficient to bring about the equilibrium. Mr Wu's

form of exorcism involves the possession of the spirit medium into Monkey God, who is already known as a demon exorcist in the literary tradition, but it is generally believed that ghosts and spirits do not resist gods. Uncle Cheong describes such visits of exorcism as "house calls," reminding me of medical doctors who see patients in their homes. "House calls" are usually done on a case-by-case basis, whereby the spirit medium has to decide on the severity of the situation. Locals will deem a house "dirty" (a colloquial term for a space with an evil spirit or spirits residing in it). Uncle Cheong struggles to explain to me how he knows whether a spirit is present or not, but it is usually because his heart beats faster for no apparent reason. Others are known to be able to "see" them directly. Some common possible scenarios that could put a person at risk of being followed by a ghost or ghosts include walking past a funeral wake or standing near the coffin of a deceased person, often placed at the "void deck."

When the spirits enter the house, they can bring with them bad luck or in some cases, diseases. In such cases, a spirit medium is called to the house to perform exorcism, which has to be done while possessed. Spirit mediums, while possessed, place talismans around the house, mainly on the top centre of all the doors. Uncle Cheong explains that this is done to form boundaries around the house so that the spirit is forced to leave. The invited deity supposedly gives the medium the authority and power, through the talismans, to drive the spirits away.

Mr Wu's practice of going from house to house (sometimes even factories) to exorcise spirits connects nodes of spiritual activity. The country is not only a landscape of government buildings and state-owned land but a country that has to negotiate with many vested interests, and share the space with different supernatural entities. In that sense, the body as country is both an expression of how spirits and pathogens afflict bodies in equilibrium and how the country Singapore can be afflicted by external forces and beings. In Singapore, spaces

change, are destroyed or are excessively reconstructed constantly. This is a feature of being in Singapore where there is always massive construction work being done to build roads, new condominiums and industrial buildings. The most massive construction being done now is the digging of new tunnels to accommodate a huge network of underground train system. The one recent construction plan that has caused some unhappiness among citizens is the exhumation of graves at the Bukit Brown Cemetery to build a new road over it.[18] This threatens the historical heritage and even personal attachments to their ancestors but from a spiritual perspective, the landscape is threatened to cease being a site for spirits, spiritual worship and one less site for spiritual practices.

Conclusion

In thinking through the poetics of spaces and hosts, the observations at Mr Wu's Monkey God temple represent a salient combination of landscapes, particularly one that is formed in Singapore. The many intersections of the body—a body that negotiates with diverse cultural signifiers, belief systems and medicine—develops a new image and a world that aggregates the sources in a space of efficacy and sacredness. Mr Wu interfaces forces, spiritual and cultural. The fact that many of the intercultural moments and creative misunderstanding occur at a single human medium, who is also connected to an array of hosts, mediums and forces, paints a picture of the landscape's cultural and social development. This development has to do with the interaction of mediums and their gods but it is also a reaction to the conditions of the nation state. The particular concrete walls are revised and assimilated into temple spaces, when old spaces are destroyed and Mr Wu was

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[18] For more information on the redevelopment of Bukit Brown Cemetery, there is a blog website (http://bukitbrown.com/main/) dedicated to documenting the process and the efforts made to preserve the heritage of the site, given that it is a site where many of Singapore's pioneers are buried.

part of that development when he and his family had to move from the 'Kampong' villages to public housing.

In an essay entitled, "Lost at Home: A Nation's State of Geographical Confusion" the journalist Cherian George reflected on the disappearance of his childhood neighbourhood, and the appearances of roads and expressways. He writes, "the place you grow up in will not be the place you grow old in, and that you can never go back, because what was there then is here no longer" (George 2000, 190). Furthermore, he explains how conversation policies introduced by the government are futile because, "[c]onversation protects only the most widely shared of memories… Memories recorded self-consciously always miss the mundane" (George 2000, 194). My account of Mr Wu's Monkey God religious practice somewhat contradicts with the bleak picture that George paints, and proves the continuation of the tradition and records a mundane and quotidian practice.

However, having said that, the truth is that Mr Wu's idiosyncratic rendering of the tradition makes it difficult for someone to take over the practice. Uncle Cheong was quite frank with me when he admitted that he was not sure how the practice could continue once his godfather stops being a spirit medium. Like I mentioned earlier, the Monkey God must choose his spirit medium, and thus choose Mr Wu's successor. At the point of writing this, no successor is found yet and it is not something that can be forced. Clearly, more work needs to be done to articulate other spiritual practices that informed identities. What I have attempted to articulate is the complex interaction between spirit and body of an individual, and often it is difficult to separate out the two (as I have shown through my observations). The individual alone highlights the vulnerability and corporeal reality of the spirit medium as he ages. As much as a spirit medium has the creative license to re-enact spiritual practices, and place their own signatures and marks on 'proper religions', spaces and hosts are still vulnerable to their material realities. Nevertheless, aging or not, the idiosyncrasies of a spirit medium

demonstrates that religious practices can be developed out of one's personal terms of engagement with a god.

Mr Wu's experience, finely interwoven with the landscapes and sources it touches upon, projects a general theme of popular religious practices. For them to persist, they must reform and preserve themselves through other means, often signifying objects to project spiritual meaning. There may be bodies to possess, and gods to take up their celestial seats, but most of all, there may be new mediums to renew and preserve the connections between spirit and man. How traces are formed by a popular religious practice can be situated at the creative energies of a medium. How a popular religious practice can persist may be tied to the ways in which it adapts and engages with its believers.

Chapter 4

Cybernetic Deities: The Taoist Technology of the Nine Emperor Gods (九皇爷) Festival in Singapore

In 1902, a Hokkien businessman from Singapore, Ong Choo Kee went to the Nine Emperor Gods temple in Penang. He prayed for his business to succeed and brought home a talisman from the temple. His wish was realised and he reciprocated by installing an amulet of the gods in his family altar. Later, he had a dream where an old man instructed him to build a temple dedicated to the Nine Emperor Gods. This was how the first temple of the Nine Emperor Gods was established in Singapore. Since then, worshippers stage an annual float parade to celebrate the gods' birthdays.

Since 2010, I have been studying this semiotic tour de force and have participated in their processions. The spirituality of the Nine Emperor Gods can be described as dispersed yet connected, as the deities are believed to be contained in different vessels—human mediums and objects such as tablets, amulets and palanquins—in different locations simultaneously. The contemporary version of the festival now engages with digital media, such as smartphones, social networks, and tablets. Information, messages, videos and images of gods are documented, reproduced and disseminated online and these resources are shared and manifested in different formats, across different platforms, and at an ever-increasing speed. Participants of the festival make those documentations of the Taoist gods available online, and this presents implications to how the festival is received, understood and performed.

I have observed that participants have no qualms about documenting and uploading videos of spiritual worship for at least two reasons. First, the festival is a public performance and everyone is free to join and attend it. There are no restrictions to being there for the

festival as long as participants do not interrupt or block the proceedings. Second, these public performances have great visibility as they are carried out in a massive celebratory mode full of colours and sounds. From electrical floats, multi-coloured lights, to speaker systems, these earlier forms of technological devices contribute to the performance and spectacle of the birthday celebrations.

More recently, digital documentation of the festival has become an integral part of the festival. Since 2010, in all the temples I have visited during the festival, I could find makeshift stalls that sold DVDs of the festival from the previous year. The proliferation of technology extends to the digital cyber-world. A decade ago before YouTube or video networks were created, it would have been difficult to find video documentation of *tang ki* worship and their rituals, but now, any simple search of "*tang ki*" (乩童)[1] on Google or YouTube, will result in multiple results. I would like to focus on a peculiar meeting point of the ancient technology of Eight Trigrams and modern computer technology. Both technologies have symbols embedded into their respective systems, where data is manipulated and reorganised for specific purposes. This, I argue, provides participants with the taxonomy and symbolic codes to form interfaces or tap into existing ones.

I propose to analyse the function of digital technology in my selected case study as an alternating force. Digital technology operates as an alternation between retrospection and anticipation: first, religious memory and tradition are reproduced on digital spaces and retrospectively re-organised and reinterpreted for present concerns; second, digital technology anticipates the future modes of communications with spirits and divinities, and as other religious practices have shown, believers are finding online spaces as equally, if not

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[1] The Hokkien term for spirit mediums that literally means "divination child". It used to be common for young boys to be chosen as spirit mediums as they supposed have the strongest *Yang* energy and successfully interact with the deities.

more, viable as physical spaces to communicate and practice their beliefs.

The Cybernetics of Religion

John Lardas Modern, while reflecting on the role of technology in 1920s America, makes a point that may still be relevant to us today:

> By multiplying the possible selves one could inhabit, technology expanded the horizon of being human. More choices were available, more opportunities to reflect, more ways of living and dying. In their capacity for reproduction and diffusion, technologies generated the capacity for regulating both nonhuman and human systems (the ideal of machines building other machines). They were, in other words, becoming cybernetic (from the Greek *kubernetes*, meaning steersman), "recreating" the world in their own image. (Modern 2012, 189)

The machines and feedback-control technology that Modern refers to are of course massively updated now. The term 'cybernetic' may also need a refreshed perspective and more specificity when I examine the digital technology used by the religious practice analysed in this chapter.

The 'cybernetic' metaphor first found its reference to technology when Norbert Wiener (1965) introduced it as a conceptual term in the 1950s when he wrote *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*. He revisits it again in *The Human Use of Human Beings* with the purpose of making "its ideas acceptable to the lay public" (Wiener 1989, 15). It was a word he found to embrace a whole field of "study of language…of messages as means of controlling machinery and society… [and] the development of computing machines and other such automata, certain reflections upon

psychology and the scientific method" (Wiener 1989, 15). The complex interrelation between science and society via technologies was thus encapsulated in a single word:

> "Cybernetics," which I derived from the Greek word kubernetes, or "steersman," the same Greek word
>
> from which we eventually derive our word "governor." (Wiener 1989, 15)

The double meanings of "steering" and "control" are further emphasised when he classed communication and control together. He further explains:

> When I communicate with another person, I impart a message to him, and when he communicates back
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> with me he returns a related message which contains information primarily accessible to him and not to
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> me. When I control the actions of another person, I communicate a message to him, and although this
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> message is in the imperative mood, the technique of communication does not differ from that of a
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> message of fact. Furthermore, if my control is to be effective I must take cognizance of any messages
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> from him which may indicate that the order is understood and has been obeyed. (Wiener 1989, 15)

Man and machine are analogous to Norbert when he writes, "When I give an order to a machine, the situation is not essentially different from that which arises when I give an order to a person" (Wiener 1989, 15). In other words, Norbert believes that there is not much difference between a signal going through a machine or a person. There are serious complications in such a thesis, most of which surround the problematic comparison of a person to machine, ignoring the obvious corporeal and cerebral differences. However, I should still attempt to make sense of this statement.

I interpret this as expressing the replaceable nature of the "helmsman" or the person in control, reiterating a Kafkaesque trope when "The Helmsman" asks, "Bin ich nicht Steuermann?" (Am I not the helmsman?) It is not that man has become a machine, but the "helm," now in the hands of a stranger, is understood as the sign of one's status as the helmsman. The original helmsman, when ordering his comrades to come with him to meet the stranger, now identifies the stranger as the helmsman. Is the helm not a symbol of

control? The helm is linked to the man. The stranger, with the helm, is now the helmsman. In such a feedback-control system, it is not a question of who man is or what a machine is; it is the symbol, the reference point that gives the control and authority to whomever or whatever to communicate a message. It exceeds Marshall McLuhan's "the medium is the message"; the medium controls the message but the medium is replaceable.

What if a third agency is introduced to the man and machine polarity? The aim of this chapter is to add a third figure to the distinction between 'man' and 'machine': god or a spiritual entity. It unsettles the polarity. It is also not assumed that none of the three figures has absolute control. Instead, it suggests that they all participate in relaying messages in a communication loop. They inter-relate and each of them plays a part in the control and transmission of messages. In this sense, my readings of the Nine Emperor Gods Festival suggest the integral and active role the Nine Emperor Gods play and how they are inseparable from humans and the machines. I acknowledge the agency of gods, insofar as they are mediated through mediums, both human and non-human, and consider seriously the unified presences of gods in man and machine.

In the same vein, the chapter asks the question as in *Deus In Machina: Religion, Technology, and the Things in Between*: Is it still useful—is it still even possible—to imagine that religion and technology can be parceled out as two discrete dimensions of the cosmos?" (Stolow 2012, 3). What is at stake, in my view, is the future development of 'messages' and 'communication facilities' and to find a vocabulary to describe and theorise the phenomenon of digital technology being involved in religious practices.

When a religious practice repeats itself in another place, another site, i.e. in the virtual, the quickest comprehension of it is to emphasize that it is empty: "the substance of the virtual, digitally produced as it is through the wobble of one and zero, may appear to be three-dimensional, but in the electroluminescence of the apparency of a stage, there is only an

"empty display," nothing to feel, nothing to touch, only the phosphorescent presence of what—unlike the object of the camera, however abstracted—was never there to begin with" (Blau 2010, 535). However, to touch and to feel—are not these senses the products of an inherent biological technology called the nervous system? For Herbert Blau, the real agency is the "artificial intelligence, the prior programming, that creates the virtual scene" (536), but in my view, there is a more intrinsic issue at hand, which can be expressed as an aporia: "[the] irreplaceability must be exemplary, that is, replaceable" (Derrida 2000, 41). In *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, Derrida already tells us that the technological reproducibility of a sentence is admitted in its utterance:

> [O]ne need not wait for cameras, videos, typewriters, and computers. As soon as the sentence is repeatable, that is, from its origin, the instant it is pronounced and becomes intelligible, thus idealizable, it is already instrumentalizable and affected by technology. And virtuality. It is thus the very instance of the instant that seems to be exemplary: exemplary in the very place where it seems unique and irreplaceable, under the seal of unicity. (Derrida 2000, 42)

At the root of the problem is not the question of 'real' agency or how we are distracted by technology, appearing as something less at a virtual scene, a theatre stage, or an open field at Choa Chu Kang; Instead, the body, when having to express oneself, when simply working as such, uses and becomes a medium. It is accretion of agencies, simultaneously adhering together and functioning separately to a point that we create "hermaphrodites" and "chimeras" to make the connection between the virtual and electrical world and the human world:

> If you travel in today's world, you carry with you a multiple electric plug—round and female at one end and square and male at the other. Hermaphroditic, in fact. If you didn't have a translator like that you wouldn't be able to shave in both France and America," says Pantope, laughing… And now business people and travellers, semi-conductors, inverters, transformers, commutators, rectifiers, transistors,

silicon chips, microprocessors… machines or devices that are designed for connecting, transferring or translating a thousand functions or machines one to another. (Serres 1995a, 168)

Having recourse to a computer and using computer language do not bypass the body. Derrida impresses on this point when he writes about the relation between the hand (and fingers) and the word processor, "[i]t engages another hand, another "command," so to speak, another induction, another injunction from body to hand and from hand to writing… We would instead have to think about other twists of manual labor, about virtually instant transitions, the time of the mutation, in a flash, by sleigh-of-hand …" (Derrida 2005b, 21). Because the "mutation" happens in a flash does not mean that it is not there or it appears as less. The more accurate and more productive interpretation of virtual technology in relation to human and religious practices is to consider that there is always something more instead of less; where bodies, machines and spirits meet, form hybrids, extensions, connections and disconnections, and are inevitably replaced by the next body.

Now, I must add that the key difference that digital technology introduced to religious practices compared with previous feedback-control technologies is wireless networks and cloud technology. These new 'communication facilities' transmit messages in real time, pushing data across waves to different machines and human users. Wireless networks introduce new paths for religious practices by being a circulating entity, incorporating stored memory of embodied practices and redistributing them virtually.

What I propose is to examine and understand digital technology as an integral part of religious practice—the Nine Emperor Gods Festival being only one of the many examples where digital technology is involved. In the same vein as Norbert's concerns of the limits of communications within and among individuals, I too wonder how messages that are transmitted through multiple platforms, religious mediums and machines would alter the perception and action of human participants. Norbert reminds us that:

Man is immersed in a world which he perceives through his sense organs. Information that he receives is co-ordinated through his brain and nervous system until, after the proper process of storage, collation, and selection, it emerges through effector organs, generally his muscles. These in turn act on the external world, and also react on the central nervous system through receptor organs such as the end organs of kinaesthesia; and the information received by the kinaesthetic organs is combined with his already accumulated store of information to influence future action. (Norbert 1989, 16)

This study focuses on the performance and performative nature of religious activities that use technology extensively and asks how technological interventions have a direct bearing on those activities. I argue that the amassing of religious memory, performance and digital documentation will take the festival to its next period of evolution. I call the process kinaesthetic digitalisation because both the kinaesthetic agency of the body and the digitalisation of bodies in motion are involved in religious expression. Digital technology can connect the contemporary to its religious past; a past of philosophies, teachings and practices with existing advanced data structures that encourage the dissemination of knowledge and practice in the cyber-digital world. This is because memory (of the performance) is passed down from one agent to another, and decoded and recoded each year. In fact, the documentation of the festival has helped the next generation of temple assistants and young believers to understand and access the practice with a current digital language that they are familiar with. This also draws our attention to how the next generation will replace the current practices.

Codes from Taoist structures interact with codes from digital technology, where data is manipulated, distributed and reorganised for religious re-purposing. Transcoding is defined as the crossing of codes, where people create interfaces or use existing ones, and 'transcode' and transfer religious data into different formats for different contexts. When considered as 'codes' the overlaps of technology and religion become obvious, and an analysis of various

cybernetic expressions of bodies relaying messages can begin to take shape, albeit in cloud networks.

The above concepts, I argue are an extension of the how the religious community commonly believe that the god-figure is distributed into figures, statues, copies, icons, tablets, talismans and etc. It is collective knowledge that gods can be divided into many presences or traces, both human and non-human. Through the juxtaposition of wireless technology involved in the devotees' documentation of their festival practices and the spiritual practices that manifest the division of gods, I aim to demonstrate the close connection between the two. The religious practice's inherent religious belief system can inform how the modes and sites of abstraction that I mentioned in Chapter 2: the machine, tele-technology and more recently digital technology, are used in support of the spiritual, the physical, and the digital archiving of the two.

The Nine Emperor Gods Festival in Singapore

The *Jieu Hwang Yeh Dan* (九皇爷诞) or Nine Emperor Gods[2] Festival takes place over the first nine days of the ninth lunar month (normally in October). It celebrates the birthday of the Nine Emperor Gods with elaborate rituals and processions and begins with a ceremony to invite the Gods from the sea. The devotees consist of mainly Chinese Singaporeans (mostly Hokkien). Margaret Chan describes the festival as "a great tang-ki (a 'Hokkien' term referring to Chinese spirit mediums) festival where devotees do penance and ritually cleanse themselves by observing a vegetarian diet. Hundreds of *tang-kis* walk in street parades performing spectacular self-mortification" (M. Chan 2006, 55). Jean DeBernardi, when

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[2] As noted by Vincent Goossaert and David A. Palmer in *The Religious Question in Modern China*, the Nine Emperor Gods religion was once common in China, but is now mostly confined to Taoist temples in the mainland (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, 262).

describing the festival, writes that "The ritual officiants of the Nine Emperor Gods Festival invoke spirit armies and gather many thousands to join them as they process to invite the Nine Emperor Gods from the sea and to send them off on the final night of the festival" (DeBernardi 2009, 183).

There are a few studies on the festival in Singapore. For example, Cheu Hock Tong[3] (1988) wrote a monograph for the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore. His work, however, took much of his research to Malaysia, where the festival enjoyed its most dominant period during the 1970s to the 1980s.[4] Jean DeBernardi also wrote about the Nine Emperors Gods Festival but like Cheu, her geographic focus was on Malaysia (Penang), where the festival is usually more spectacular and the processions usually extend into the streets.[5]

There is one focused academic study on the Singapore version—Ruth-Inge Heinze (1981) wrote a short article for the *Asian Folklore Studies* journal, titled "The Nine Imperial Gods in Singapore" and its relevance to the current study is to show how the festival has been updated by the local organisers and participants. The festivities are still performed in open spaces (such as football fields) and within temples, where marquees and temporary opera stages are erected. However, walking processions to invite or send off the gods are abruptly cut short, due to restrictions to how far public roads can be blocked off for the processions. To continue the journey to the sea to invite the Nine Emperor Gods, vehicles will chauffeur worshippers and spirit mediums through the highways and onto the secluded beaches. Despite the gaps and pauses in the processional performance, filling in are the reproductions

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[3] Cheu Hock Tong's name is unfortunately misspelt as "Cheu Tong Hok" in the footnote of Chapter Ten of the book by Vincent Goossaert and David A. Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China*.
[4] DeBernardi observes, "The enormous scale of this festival in the 1970s and 1980s suggests that Penangites urgently sought such forms of spiritual protection in those years" (DeBernardi 2009, 183).
[5] For a sense of how the festivals are held in Malaysia, there a several blogs that document the festival: 1) http://9emperorgods.wordpress.com/ (Ampang), 2) http://9-emperor-festival-kajang-selangor.blogspot.com (Selangor), 3) http://www.nine-emperorgods.org/ (Ipoh).

of the events and online feedback of the festival. Therefore, this means that a more nuanced

reading of the festival is needed to update the earlier research done on the popular religion.

To a large extent, the Nine Emperor Gods religious practice in Singapore can be

discussed as a "contest of wills with state authorities" and it will generate important

discussions on the tensions and conflicts between religious practices and the authorities.[6]

However, temple networks in Singapore are not only formed primarily by state legislation,

permission and control, and the reactions of its religious citizens. There are rituals

specifically developed to cope with relocating temples and altars of gods, when the state

decides to take back the lease of the land that a temple resides on. The crucial factor that

preserves the Nine Emperor Gods religious practice is the robustness of the network,

consisting of deities, devotees, liturgies, practices and religious apparatuses that are both

material and immaterial. This robustness and the capacity to negotiate with changing

landscapes, environment, social and political conditions make possible the preservation of the

Nine Emperor Gods festival. Furthermore, it is the same robustness and capacity that make

possible the incorporation of digital technology.

The Singapore version presents significant opportunities to study the festival as two

kinds of performance: first, the public rites accorded to revered deities; second, the

performative and expressive power of digital media in a religious context. Digital technology

and new media (smartphones, tablets, YouTube, and social networking sites such as

Facebook and Twitter) shift religious performances from sacred sites to online sites. This is

further supported by government initiatives to raise Internet connectivity.[7] More people will

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[6] Vineeta Sinha has written a monograph along that line of enquiry, which is to provide an empirical and historical account of the Hindu religion and its encounters with the state of Singapore. (See Sinha, Vineeta. 2011. *Religion State Encounters in Hindu Domains*. Heideberg; London; New York: Springer.)

[7] In early 2012, the Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore (IDA) attempts to raise the minimum quality of service standards for 3G mobile services for the following areas: Nationwide outdoor areas (to more than 99 per cent from more than 95 per cent previously); Road and Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) tunnels (to more than 99 per cent from more than 95 per cent for new tunnels) and within buildings (more than 85 per cent coverage within each building). (Retrieved from https://www.ida.gov.sg/About-Us/Newsroom/Media-Releases/2012/IDA-Raises-Quality-of-Service-Standards-for-3G-Mobile-Services-to-Improve-Consumer-

be connected anytime and almost anywhere on the island. Participants of the festival engage the technology to mobilise people to join the festival, often reproducing the festival schedule online. Digital media are used extensively by videographers and photographers to document the rituals. These archivists can be commissioned by temples, professionals, academics, or amateurs, where public rites are reproduced digitally as DVDs, online streaming videos, or for personal collection. These reproductions can compete with, complicate and complement the public rites, performed for the gods and humans.

Performing Data

By studying the spatial, temporal and symbolic configurations used by Taoist mediums (both priests and spirit mediums), I can: first, observe the interpretations of Taoist trigrams incorporated into the mediums' processional practice; second, highlight the role of deities and divinities in the rituals; third, examine how symbols are accessed by the participants and how data is decoded from those symbols.

When studying the practice of the Nine Emperor Gods religion in Singapore and Malaysia, Cheu describes the *Jiuhuangye* (九皇爷) or the Nine Emperor Gods ritual process in terms of priests and spirit mediums moving within clear spatial configurations of a temple or ritual complex (see Cheu 1988, 109-111). Margaret Chan describes processes that incorporate Taoist trigrams or what she calls "magic maps" into the dances of spirit mediums. By combining Chan's diagram of a temple and Cheu's diagram of the movement of a priest within the temple it shows a priest's movement from one point to another in a temple in

Experience). IDA's latest report on Infocomm usage in households and by individuals states that in 2011, 85% of resident households in Singapore have internet access and the same 85% have broadband access. (Retreived from http://www.ida.gov.sg/Infocomm-Landscape/Facts-and-Figures/Infocomm-Usage-Households-and-Individuals).

relation to the spatial configuration. Figure 14 shows the cyclic movements of a priest who moves through elements of *Yin* and *Yang* (the two basic elements or energies the universe is made up of).

YANG

YIN altar (Spirits of the Underworld or Female Deities)

Doumu's Palace/Nine Emperor Gods Altar

YANG altar (Local Great Saint or Celestial God)

Divination Platform

YIN

YANG

Dragon-Tiger Gate
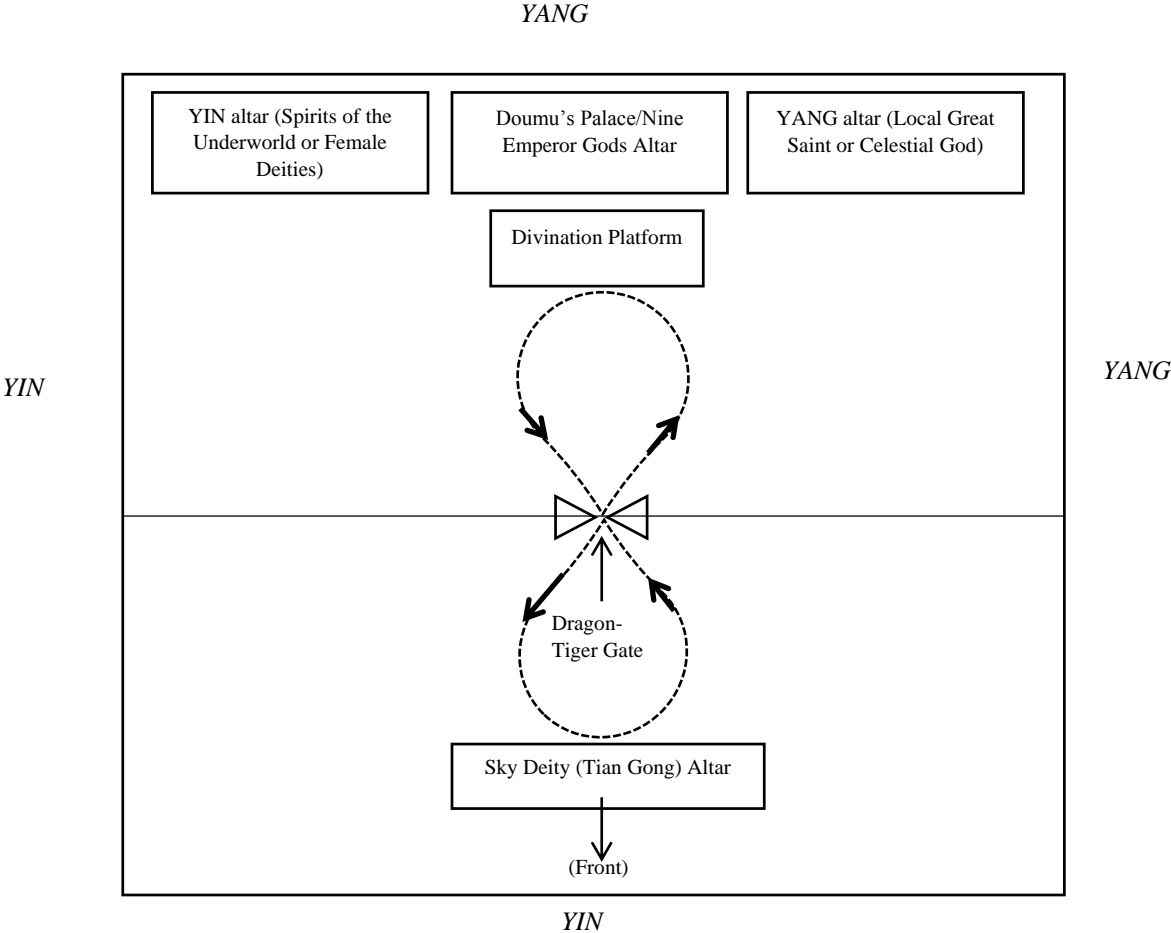
Sky Deity (Tian Gong) Altar

(Front)

YIN

FIG. 14 Footpath of Priest through the temple.

The layout of the temple is arranged in a *Yin* and *Yang* configuration and follows eight directions.[8] The configuration determines the positions of all altars and statues of gods in the space, as well as the movement of any temple worshipper, as he or she makes his or her way into the temple and out. On every 1st and 15th day of the lunar calendar, temple worshippers

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[8] Note, however, that the directions in the Eight Trigrams are the reverse of the conventional compass points. For example, South on the Eight Trigrams is actually North on the modern compass.

enter and exit by following the figure of 8 (a symbolic movement to denote infinity) shown above in dotted lines, thus completing their journey from *Yin to Yang*, and *Yang* to *Yin*.

To illustrate this movement in performance terms and to expand on the importance of the concept of *Yin* and *Yang*, let me describe my first-hand experience of the final ceremony of the Nine Emperor Gods festival, which took place on the ninth day of the ninth lunar month. I will show how existing structures and configurations affect the participants' behaviour. The ceremony I observed was at Choa Chu Kang *Dou Mu Gong* (Chinese: 斗母宫) in Singapore and it usually begins just after sunset at around 7 p.m. I must add that a huge network of temples and worshippers were simultaneously performing their rites all over Singapore while I was physically at the ceremony at Choa Chu Kang.

13 October 2013, 7pm, Teck Whye Lane, Singapore

It is the last day of the Nine Emperor Gods Festival. There is a final procession to send off the gods and it begins with a priest standing outside the temple. The temple is brimming with devotees and curious on-lookers. The priest first enters the temple ground and heads straight to the Sky Deity (天公) altar. He prays to the Sky Deity with his back facing the temple. From the gate or *Yin* position, he next walks toward and into the narrow Dragon-Tiger Gate (龙虎门). Musicians play drums and gongs in the background. He walks to the right of the altar (or east side) and arrives at the "divination platform" where he leads the main contingent. He chants from the scriptures, praising the Nine Emperor Gods. Inside the main altar, nine topless male spirit mediums stand, calmly waiting for the nine gods to possess them. A *gong*[9] is struck loudly, announcing a critical moment— the possessions have

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[9] A percussion instrument shaped in a flat disc made of metal and is hit with a mallet to create a loud sound.

begun. Everyone quickly kneels before the altar, where statues of the nine gods have been placed. Each spirit medium has two assistants standing beside him. All of a sudden, the mediums half-shut their eyes, as if struck by a physical force, and shake violently. It appears that the 'gods' are literally leaping from the statues at the altar into the nine mediums. The assistants form a barrier between the spirit mediums with their arms. They watch and try to assist the mediums as they go into trance—which consists of rapid up and down movements of their torsos and arms. Possessed by the gods, the spirit mediums employ what Chan calls a "magical Yu Step" or *Yu bu* (禹步). It comprises a side-to-side stagger and a hop on one leg (85). This step is an interpretation of the Eight Trigrams of the Posterior Heavens[10] (后天八卦), reproduced below in Figure 15[11]:
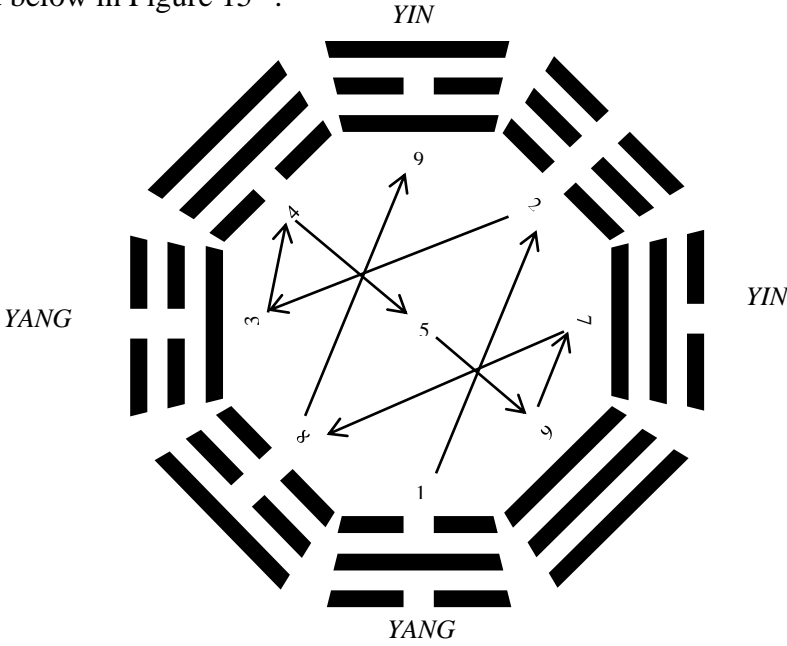

FIG. 15. Numerical Representation of the Nine
Emperor Gods in relation to the Eight Trigrams.

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[10] The Eight Trigrams of the Posterior Heavens[10] (后天八卦) is a modification of the earlier Eight Trigrams, which consists of only eight numbers instead of nine. The first version forms the basis for the writings in *Yi Jing* and it was Fu Xi (伏羲) who invented the first Eight Trigrams. However, it was the King Wen of Zhou (周文王) who modified the Eight Trigrams. While Fu Xi believed that all things are divided into up or down (天地者万物之上下也), King Wen subscribed to the idea that *Yang* can rise from below to above and *Yin* can fall from above to below. As *Yin* and *Yang* can interchange and swap places, so can all things. Thus, *Yin* and *Yang* interact and that is the natural order. (This is a summarized translation of 陈博文, 王沬 (Chen Bo Wen and Wang Mo). 2011. 《易经的智慧》 (*The Wisdom of Yi Jing*), 64-67).

[11] I have replaced the Chinese characters representing each diagram with numbers.

The above trigrams show that there is structural logic to the movement and organisation of participants, objects and spirits. For the spirit mediums, the journey is in the opposite direction as they exit from the *Yang* position (number 1), where the deity statues are, to position 2 (*Yin*). As they move from one point to another (from 1 to 4), *Yang* and *Yin* interchange and they arrive at the centre or position 5. Position 5 is an important numerical representation of the heaven and earth. As explained in 《周易》(*Zhou Yi*):

天一地二，天三地四，天五地六，天七地八，天九地十。[My Translation: Heaven one Earth two, Heaven three Earth four, Heaven five Earth six, Heaven seven Earth eight, Heaven nine Earth ten.]

Heaven is represented by odd numbers and Earth by even numbers. There are five numbers for heaven and five for earth. In early ancient records, these numerical representations of heaven and earth were supposedly drawn on a turtle and a horse. These drawings have become common diagrams for any book on *Zhou Yi*. First, the turtle-back drawings or 洛书 (*Luo Shu*) present the numbers in what is one of the earliest forms of the Eight Trigrams. The drawing is reproduced below:
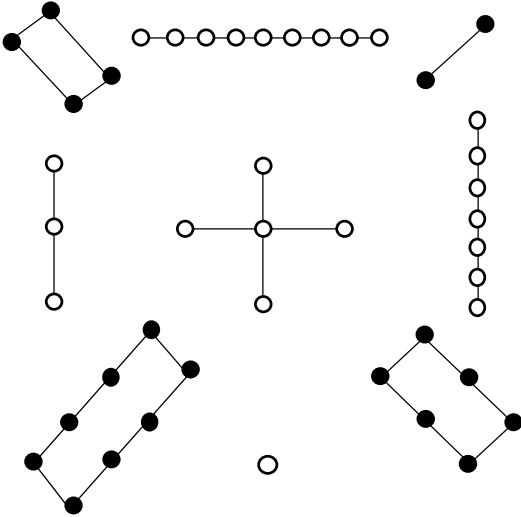

FIG. 16. *Luo Shu*. The black dots represent even numbers and the white dots represent odd numbers. This order of dots would later become the order for the Eight Trigrams.

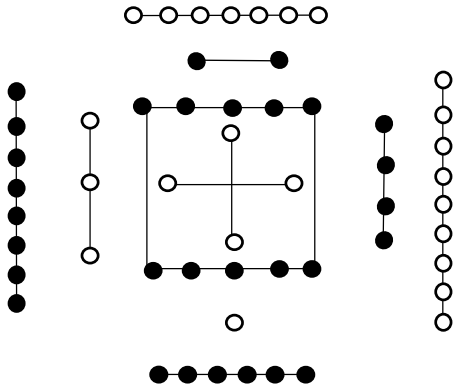Another figure, which is the *He Shu* (河书), shows the numbers in binaries:

FIG. 17. *He Shu*. An ancient binary system that determines the basic breakdown of all attributes of Heaven and Earth.

The number five can be derived from each binary (with subtraction). For instance, if we take 6=5+1, 7=5+2, we see that the number 5 operates as the central number within the equations. It functions as the central location where everything meets and is a highly important number. With it, basic Chinese frameworks of almost anything can be formed:

	1-6	2-7	3-8	4-9	5-10
5 directions	North	South	East	West	Centre
5 elements	Water	Fire	Wood	Metal	Earth
5 organs	Kidney	Heart	Liver	Lungs	Spleen
5 sensory organs	Ear	Tongue	Eyes	Nose	Mouth
5 weather conditions	Cold	Hot	Windy	Dry	Humid

Table 1: How things can be grouped into 5 elementary parts.

In theatrical terms, the central position is where people, gods and objects converge in a theatre-in-the-round configuration. It is located between the Sky Deity altar and the temple altar and where the spirit mediums perform their full transformation (See Figure 18). The assistants help to dress the spirit mediums in bright yellow and pass each of them a flag and

three joss sticks that are offered to the Jade Emperor (玉皇大帝), the Emperor of Heaven.

The flags have the image of the Eight Trigrams on it. Once all the mediums are dressed, they

fully embody the gods, or from their perspective, the gods embody the mediums. From a

performance perspective, the invisible gods are fully materialised in costume and in

behaviour. As mentioned earlier, they shook violently and were restrained by the temple

assistants. Only after the full donning of their attire do they immediately assume a controlled

and poised physicality. This is done at the central position, a theatrical epicentre that is

formed by being by the mediums in their most intense and yet most measured manner.

In that state, the spirit mediums are relatively calm and they go into a deep trance, as

observed from the relaxing of their muscles and their stationary postures, which contrasts

with the initial violent nature of their possessions. This is followed by a period of quiet

praying to the Jade Emperor.

FIG. 18. The nine spirit mediums gather at the central position and form a circle; they bow
before the altar of the Jade Emperor. Others, such as the boy next to the Jade Emperor, whip
out their cameras to document the event.
Photo: Alvin Lim

The prayer to the Jade Emperor is followed by a flurry of photos of the possessed mediums, taken by professional photographers possibly hired by the temple (judging from the way they easily acquired access to good spots to take photographs) as well as temple members and members of the public. Comparing the 2011 festival with the 2013 festival, digital technology can now be described as being directly involved in the ritual process. The nine spirit mediums walk back to the inner temple and pose for a photograph. As I am unaware of this new event but the others are, I cannot make it in time to take up the same position as the cameraman. Instead, I stand at the side and take several shots to show the process.

FIG. 19. The nine spirit mediums gather back outside of
the inner temple and pose for a group shot.
Photo: Alvin Lim

FIG. 20. This in turn draws the attention of two different groups: first the
worshippers who pray to the gods and second the photographers.
Photo: Alvin Lim

The ease with which the whole ritual incorporates the presence of cameras and the
deliberate posing of the spirit mediums is evidence of the evolving nature of the ritual. In the
period of two years, there is an increased presence of video cameras that are deliberately
worked into the performance. Videographers hired by the temple committee and amateur
photographers alike skilfully positioned themselves at every ritual at every stage of the
ceremony. This above scene is the agglomeration of recording technology and religious
practice.

After the photographs are taken, the gods stagger towards the temple exit greeted by a
temple assistant. He whips the floor with a long leather whip. It is shaped like a snake and is
used to exorcise evil spirits or to inform the evil spirits of the presence of the gods so that
they will flee and thus clear the path for the gods.

FIG. 21 The exorcism rite.
Photo: Alvin Lim

After the spirit mediums gather outside the temple, nine palanquins, each with a statue of one of the nine gods inside, are carried by two men who move them into the central position of the temple. They move in sequence— from the youngest of the ninth god to the first or eldest. The palanquins are heavily decorated with coloured light bulbs, fully lit or flashing and powered by a small generator attached below the palanquin. Two men rock the palanquin side to side, further highlighting the bright display of the palanquin. The palanquins are not merely vessels of the deities' statues. They supposedly carry the essences of the Nine Emperor Gods; devotees hold their palms together and pray to the palanquins. What is more intriguing are the easy shifts in the roles of the members—from a praying subject to an archivist, who captures the sacred object in an image file in one's smartphone. The hands change gestures, with the smartphones and tablets becoming extensions of the hands.

FIG. 22. Praying devotees act also as archivists of their religious activities.
Photo: Alvin Lim

FIG. 23. Documented image of one of the nine spirit mediums.
Photo: Alvin Lim

This echoes the spirit mediums' hands: they hold joss sticks on one hand and a flag in the other—both are objects that signify the links to the heavenly realm. The joss sticks are burnt so that the smoke rises up and conveys a message. The capturing device in turn records the message and stores it for future reference. In other words, a circuit is established, not just between god and spirit medium, but also spirit medium and digital medium. The recipients of the messages and the meanings behind those actions are different but the cybernetic act of a hand raising an object is clearly similar in that the message is only possibly transmitted when a symbolic feature is added to the device. Whether it is a processor chip with an Apple A6 logo or the Taoist Trigrams, the symbol authorises the object to perform a transmission, and to connect to a space other than our immediate one[12] without actually understanding the inner mechanism of the machine or medium.

FIG. 24. Photographer takes picture of Flag-bearer.
Photo: Alvin Lim

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[12] Derrida reminds us that "with computers, even if people know how to use them up to a point, they rarely know, intuitively and without thinking—at any rate, *I* don't know—how the internal demon of the apparatus operates. What rules it obeys. This secret with no mystery frequently marks our dependence in relation to many instruments of modern technology" (Derrida 2005b, 23). I may add that this is also applicable to the many instruments of ancient technology, and often I hear from my informants say that many of the Taoist symbols and mathematical functions are not fully understood and thus not fully invoked in practice.

Digital technology can also affect the performance in other tangible ways. A prominent leader of the temple sees the cameraman and gestures to the flag-bearer to raise the flag in front of his forehead, which I assume is for the camera to take a good shot of the ritual. Hence, in performance terms, the cue for the next movement of the procession has changed. Usually, the conventional visual cue is that of the palanquin arriving behind the flag before the flag-bearer raises his flag. Now however, the leader reacts impromptu, breaks the convention and takes the cue from the camera in position. This does not in any way undermine the proceedings but instead prepares the flag-bearer and the palanquin to continue the ritual and complete the departure from the temple.

The above image, now documented and a trace of the sacred ceremony, does not make it a lesser representation of the gods' performance. In fact, it highlights the unique incorporation of technology in the ceremonial practice, both for archiving and as performance cues. Talismans, statues and palanquins have shown how the marks of the gods are transposed to inanimate objects. They are deemed efficacious and are seen as manifestations of the gods. In fact, the digital figures "processed" on a computer are like phantoms to the extent that they are less bodily, more "spiritual," more ethereal.

Paper Machines

DERRIDA: The figure of the text "processed" on a computer is like a phantom to the extent that it is less bodily, more "spiritual," more ethereal. There is something like a disincarnation of the text in this. (Derrida 2005b, 30)
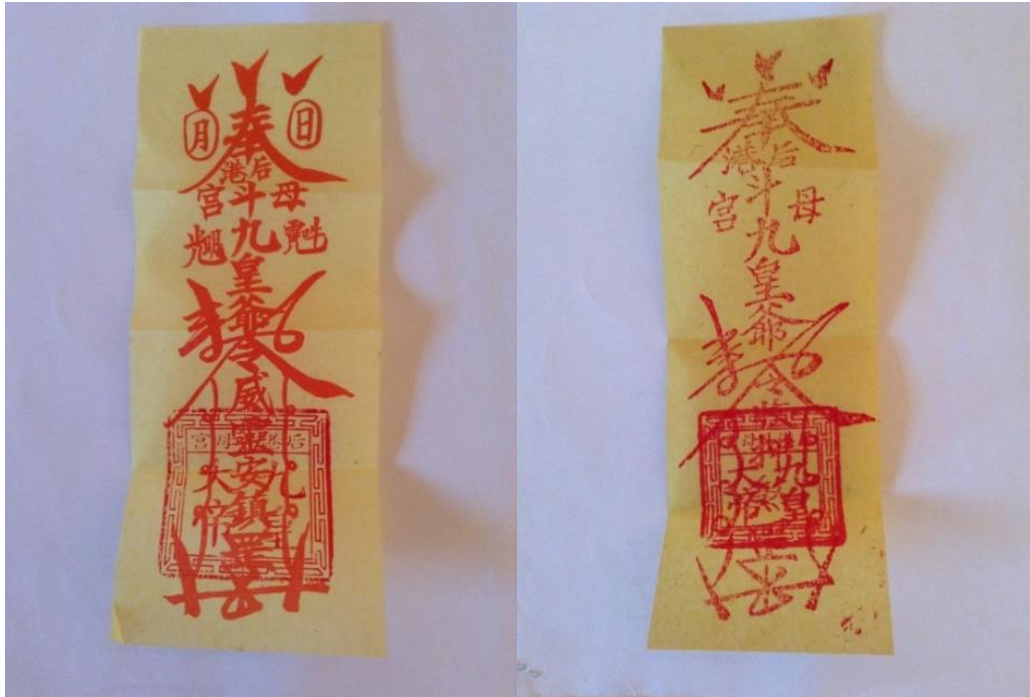
FIG. 25. Talisman (left) to paste on the front door of a house as protection.
FIG. 26. Talisman (right) to drink for personal blessing.

The spectral silhouette of Derrida informs the understanding of printing and the

processing of signatures and marks of the gods. I am referring to the talismans seen above

(Figures 25 and 26) which I received while I was at the festival. The talisman on the left is

brought home and pasted on the door. Carried with them are the gods' signatures of blessing

and spells; the other talisman is meant to be consumed by burning and mixing it with water,

which a believer then drinks. The key differences are that the characters of "sun" and "moon"

are included in the door talisman and the spells are written differently on them. Otherwise,

they both recall the court tokens[13] used since the Ming Dynasty in China to represent the

sovereign's messenger and he would carry the Emperor's edict or message. The words *feng*[14]

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[13] Incidentally, the word "token" can refer to a channel access method called token passing. This method of computer networking refers a token as a signal that passes through nodes in a multi-point transmission medium to authorise the nodes to communicate. In Singapore, for example, tokens refer to the small device banks give to their account holders to retrieve a pin number in order to access their bank accounts on the Internet. In China, tokens are translated as "*lingpai*" (令牌), which evokes the ancient tool used to symbolise authority, command and messenger of a sovereign.

[14] The character *feng* can also be loosely translated as to give, to hold (something) with both hands as a mark of respect or it can mean to serve. The combination of two characters *fengyang* (信奉) is used to refer to believe in a religion and to obey its precepts.

(奉) and *ling* (令) frame the spells—the former can mean to carry out (an order) and the latter can mean an order. Thus, the message carried in the talisman is an order, a speech act, and a spell, proclaimed and imprinted in the name of the Nine Emperor God.

From computer processing to a god's performative act, i.e. by imprinting his unique stamp, a sequence of spiritual to material and back to spiritual is created. Those transformations are part of a system wedded in a way that, similar to how Derrida describes the nature of printing, "you had only to say the word and it would be printed" (Derrida 2005b, 30). What I think this implies for the printing of spiritual objects is the agency of the devotee: he or she had only to say the word and the spell would be imprinted. The extent by which a mark, a signature and an image can carry its effects to others is multiplied through copying. Printing becomes a spiritual act—the red ink and the yellow paper are duplicated, with either the use of an ink mould and stamp onto the paper or it is more recently done with an ink printer. The talismans I received are printed with a computer (the ink is clear and finely imprinted onto the paper) printer but stamped on it is the seal symbol of the first brother of the Nine Emperor Gods. The two imprints differ in the consistency of the ink. The spells on the talismans are multiplied, and the talismans are readily available and handed out to anyone who needs them. In addition, wishes of the devotees are written on yellow paper and attached to a paper boat, which will be burned when it goes out into the sea with the gods. It is believed that the gods will carry their wishes with them and hopefully grant them.

FIG. 27. Paper boat with paper wishes from devotees.
Photo: Alvin Lim

The paper boat is the exemplary paper machine. It reverses the communications with the gods. While the talismans are primarily gods' messages to their believers, the paper boat is the vessel that carries the messages of the devotees. In each paper the name of a person or family name is imprinted and the wish is prayed upon it. The purpose is two-fold: it affirms the monetary offering made to the temple by the person; it also tells the gods specifically the name of the person who has made the offering, and thus has asked for a wish. At the end of the festival, the boat is burned and, like the joss paper and incense sticks mentioned in Chapter 3, the burning establishes an access to the gods.

Marks, signatures, wishes and knowledge are passed from one medium to another, human to non-human, heaven to earth. Ancient systems are adapted to address present concerns, and together they determine the organisation of human participants and mediums, and the arrangement and function of objects. Thus, networks are formed to organise visible entities into meaningful interactions with invisible entities. Proper names of gods and devotees are constantly repeated in various mediums. In a sense, the mediums multiply the gods into copies—palanquins, tablets, tokens, talismans, banners, flags and spirit mediums.

In order to access and interact with the copies, ancient symbols are evoked and re-enacted through mediums in performance. More crucially, the festival's spirituality is derived from the excessive making of copies. Collectively speaking, the copies of gods form an interface by which they the gods are re-enacted in moments of those copies interacting with each other: such as possessed spirit mediums praying to their tablets, statues and icons that themselves carry essences of the gods, writing on talismans in order to sign it off as a spiritually blessed object to be disseminated to the devotees, or palanquins moving and rocking in turns after the spirit mediums. The collective performance of the copies of gods articulates the ambiguous nature of where the gods are situated at—they are here and there all at the same time, multiplied and fragmented, without losing their own precise identity and meaning for the community.

Re-enacting Gods via Interfaces

> Re-enactment, currently a hugely popular strategy in the art and performance worlds and beyond (as signaled, importantly, by Abramovic;'s own *Seven Easy Pieces*), activates precisely the tension between our desire for the material (for the other's *body*; for "presence"; for the "true event") and the impossibility of ever fixing this in space and time. The re-enactment both testifies to our desire to know the past in order to secure ourselves in the present and the paradox of that knowledge always taking place through *repetition*. It thus exposes the paradox of that knowledge, proving our own inexorable mortality: the fact that we are always reaching to secure time, and always failing. (Jones 2011, 19)

The strategy of re-enactment applies to religious practices, and at stake here are issues similar to those raised by Amelia Jones. The effect for me is not that re-enactment "opens to otherness (the otherness of the initial author, the otherness of interpreters and spectators from then and now), and thus to the impossibility of its own wholeness and coherence (and of its "originality")" (Jones 2011, 33). Jones however provides a way to articulate the complex issue

of mediums re-enacting gods. Performance theory, as Jones suggests, provided the understanding "that the meaning of the body in action can only be known to the spectator through its authentic live enactment," but Jones accurately points out that it contradicts the fact that "this body's actions can only be known if they are recognizable, if they are reiterating or repeating previous gestures that have salience to viewers, as coded from accepted past traditions" (Jones 2011, 33). The paradox of spirit mediums annually re-enacting as gods and arriving at Singapore's beaches is that the meaning of the spirit medium being possessed, durational and ephemeral, can only be known to the participants through its live enactment, but they are also "reiterating or repeating previous gestures." Another contradiction has to be added here: the live enactment necessarily reacts to the local conditions and mobilises the technological and representational tools to document this repeatable event that produces traces of past traditions. To the participants, the documentation of spirit mediums is to retain some trace or semblance of the live enactment. It is not that they believe they can bring home the gods in their digital devices, but they create a ready common resource for returning to the enactment of religious truth in our computer-literate society. These are the photographs, texts, and film documenting the now, reiterated in Google search engines and online galleries. Re-enactment has to be now understood as not only the live event itself. The durational performance extends beyond the physical site, from the supposed "live" stage to an extended "live" some-interface else.

The mainframe or interface of the Nine Emperor Gods have its roots on ancient Chinese astronomy. On the inconsistencies on the origins of the Nine Emperor gods DeBernardi writes, "[s]ome described them as vegetarian and pure; others guessed their true status to be quite low despite their lofty titles. According to one man: "The Nine Emperor Gods are pirates; and they're all bad" (DeBernardi 2009, 189-190). Another version of the myth places the Nine Emperor Gods as the sons of Bushel Mother or *Dou Mu* (斗母). In one

of the important Taoist texts 《太上玄灵北斗本命延生真经》 (The Life-preserving Scripture of the Grand Supreme Divine North Dipper), the origin of the nine sons and the Bushel Mother is briefly explained. In the book 《中国道教》 (China's Taoism), it summarises the myth:

> 龙汉时有一国王名周御，其妃名紫光夫人。某日，夫人于莲池中沐浴，忽感莲花九朵化生九子。长为天皇大帝，次子为紫微大帝，其余七子为贪狼、巨门，禄存、文曲，廉贞、武曲、破军七星。 [In the period of Long Han (One of the Taoist genesis periods), there is a king named Zhou Yu and he had a concubine named Madam Ci Guang. One day, as she was bathing in a lotus pond, the lotus flowers metamorphosed into nine sons. The first became the Great Heavenly Emperor, the second Ci Wei Emperor and the rest are Tan Lang, Ju Men, Lu Chun, Wen Qu, Lian Chen, Wu Qu and Po Jun, the seven stars. (My translation.)] (Wang Yi'e 2009)
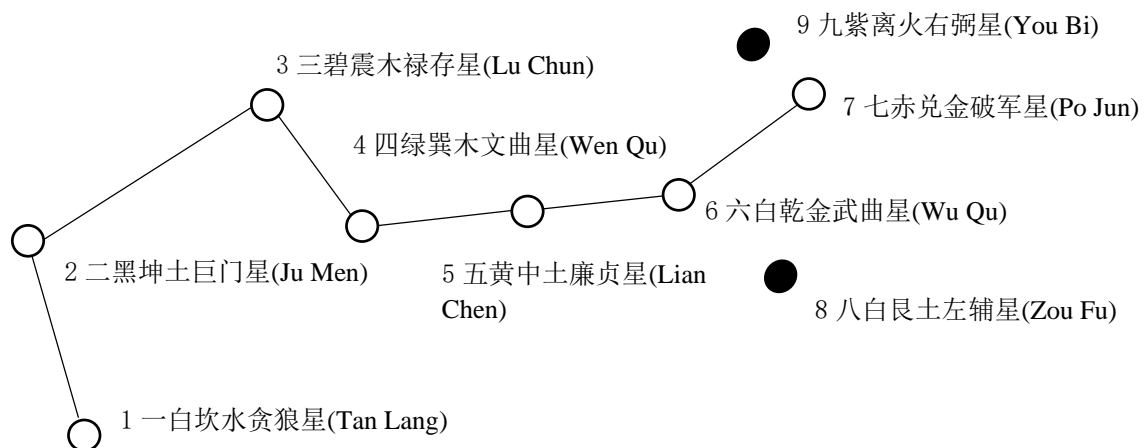

FIG. 28. Illustration of the Nine Stars (北斗九星).

The astronomic origins have a direct bearing on the performance of the Nine Emperor Gods festival. In Choa Chu Kang *Dou Mu Gong* it is believed that they are nine brothers or gods and each of them can possess a spirit medium and a palanquin and during important events, they perform in sequence. Going back to Figure 14, their movement is a reverse of the priest's:

YANG

YIN altar (Spirits of the Underworld or Female Deities)	Doumu's Palace/Nine Emperor Gods Altar	YANG altar (Local Great Saint or Celestial God)

Divination Platform

YIN

YANG

Dragon-Tiger Gate
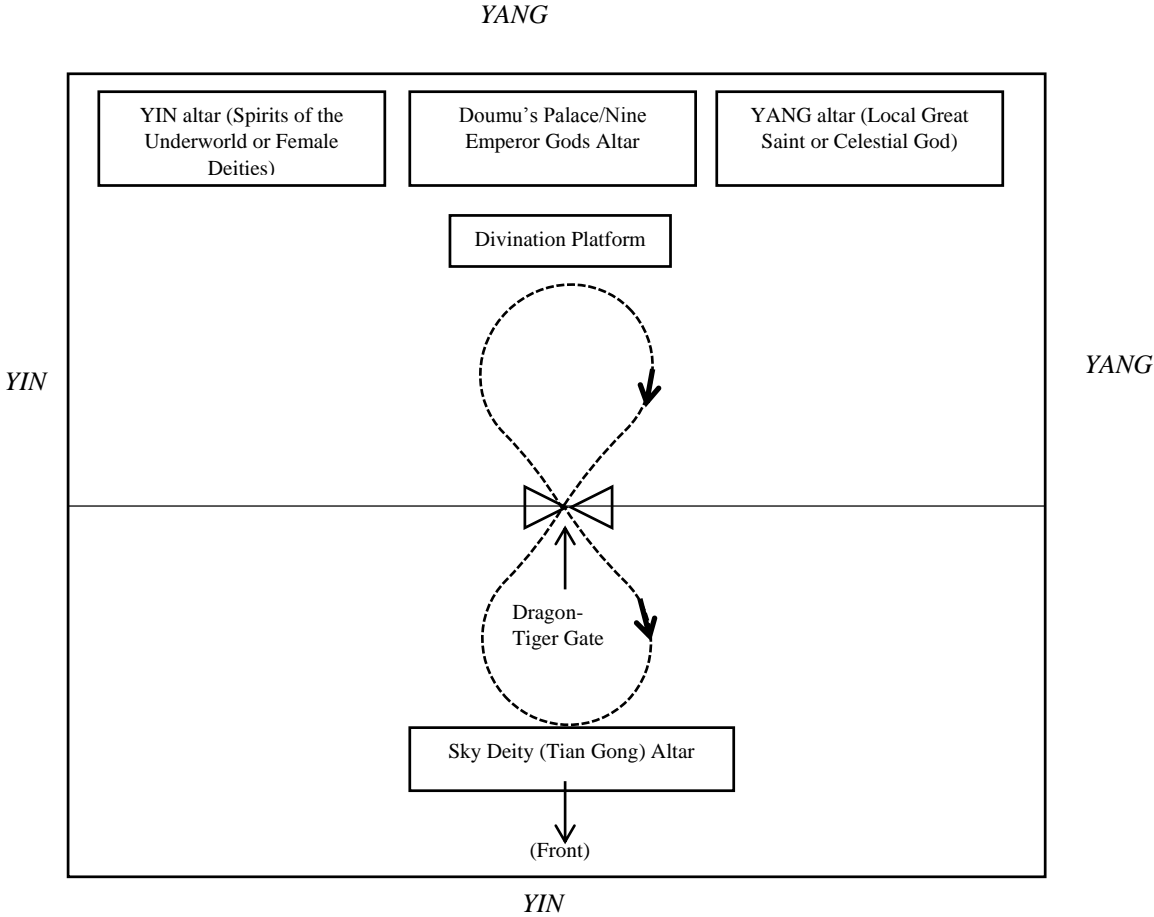
Sky Deity (Tian Gong) Altar

(Front)

YIN

FIG. 29. Footpath of the gods through the temple.

Note, however that I have only marked half of the pathway. As this is the sending off ceremony, the first part of the pathway was actually done on the evening when the gods first arrived at the temple. On the last day of the festival, the gods complete the full pathway. The sequences are arranged such that the youngest brother will always be the first to begin the walk, followed by the eighth brother and so on. All sequences are concluded by the eldest brother or *Gao Ong Dua Dei* (in Hokkien).

Once the palanquins are out of the temple, they are paraded with the nine spirit mediums down the street, one star and one brother at a time, from nine to one. However, this must not be understood as a mere numerical progression. It is also a repetition. While the final day of the Nine Emperor Gods Festival can be understood as an event, i.e. has a beginning and an end, the whole festival is performed again on the 1st day of the next ninth

lunar month. The whole procession is performed in anticipation of the next. The gods are sent off to sea at the end of the festival, but they return again each year. With their departure, they leave behind their blessings for the year. The festival can thus be understood as a process of renewal and rebirth.

The rituals I have described so far also re-enact the cosmological principles of the birth of the nine sons or stars, in the hierarchal order of the eldest to the youngest. The rituals perform manifestations of great strength and endurance of pain when spirit mediums are possessed by the gods. Spirit mediums remain possessed for as long as three to four hours and during this time, their trance states are micro-performances of those principles. In short, enactments of gods can only be performed under the framework of an existing celestial interface, where stars and numbers are connected. It is a literal understanding of the stars, making visible what are difficult to see yet alone comprehend. Nevertheless, the structure of the Nine Stars functions as storage points, from which one can draw meaning, and thus define the performance. The convergence of ancient religious structures and contemporary computer systems, Taoist data and digital data is best manifested online, in popular digital interfaces. Religious symbols become efficacious when they are given a context to make sense and to even direct a ritual or human activity. Thus, interfaces, whether in digital or physical space, provide the necessary contexts for symbols to direct those meaningful interactions.

Traces of Gods: Trigrams and Binary Codes

In the binary digits, the basis of computer language, technology and command executions, exist the traces of Taoist knowledge and celestial mathematics. In 1703, Gottfried Leibniz wrote in *Explication de l'Arithmétique Binaire, Die Mathematische Schriften*:

What is amazing in this reckoning is that this arithmetic by 0 and 1 is found to contain the mystery of the lines of an ancient King and philosopher named Fuxi, who is believed to have lived more than 4000 years ago, and whom the Chinese regard as the founder of their empire and their sciences. There are several linear figures attributed to him, all of which come back to this arithmetic, but it is sufficient to give here the Figure of the Eight Cova, as it is called, which is said to be fundamental, and to join to them the explanation which is obvious, provided that one notices, firstly, that a whole line — means unity, or 1, and secondly, that a broken line -- means zero, or 0. (Leibniz 1879, 223)

FIG. 30. Leibniz's binary table to explain the Figure of the Eight Cova.

Above is a table created by Leibniz to explain the "Figure of the Eight Cova" (as he calls it) or the "八卦" (Eight Trigrams). To explain briefly, the dotted vertical line ¦ denotes *Yin* and the vertical line | denotes *Yang*. Leibniz has replaced the lines with 0 for *Yin* and 1 for *Yang*. To understand this, we must first look at his binary arithmetic and the fact that he uses the simplest progression of twos as the basis for all sorts of operations and calculations—a progression that is also used in computers.

The binary number consists of only two numbers—0s and 1s. In the first binary digit of 0 or the "坤" (Kun) trigram (which consists of three dotted lines), the value of 000 or ¦¦¦ is counted in powers of 2:

$(0 * 2^2) + (0 * 2^3) + (0 * 2^0) = 0 + 0 + 0 = 0$

If we follow this further down the table and get the value of 5 or |¦| (离), we have:

$(1* 2^2) + (0 * 2^1) + (1 * 2^0) = 4 + 0 + 1 = 5$

And for 7, we have:

$(1* 2^2) + (1 * 2^1) + (1 * 2^0) = 4 + 2 + 1 = 7$

Leibniz believes that the Europeans rediscovered the true meaning of Fu Xi's trigrams. However, he may have neglected to consider the later modifications of Fu Xi's trigrams. There are at least two differences between the two systems of binary numbers. First, Leibniz's progression of twos is not the sole progression that can be derived from the Eight Trigrams. In *Yi Jing*, the basic idea of twos is the combination of two sets of trigrams and it cannot be simply understood as a progression of twos. Beyond numbers, trigrams are depositories of symbols, where elements of the universe meet and interact. Leibniz briefly mentions that Fu Xi's figure goes up to sixty-four but more needs to be mentioned. The sixty-four figure actually refers to sets of hexagrams, each with five aspects:

1. Figure of the hexagram (卦象)

2. Name of the hexagram (卦名)

3. Meaning of the hexagram (卦辞)

4. Line (one of the three lines in a trigram) numbers (爻数)

5. Meaning of the Line (爻辞)

The hexagrams are composed of two trigrams (from the Eight Trigrams). For example, the third hexagram is *Tun* (屯) and the figure for this hexagram is ䷂ or in binary terms 010001. Unlike Leibniz's binary numbers, no "0" is lost for the sake of binary progression and every "0" and "1" has a meaning attached to it (爻). In *Zhou Yi,* there are sixty-four hexagrams and three-hundred and eighty-four lines. Every hexagram has a meaning and the combination of two trigrams of broken lines and full lines form a symbol. This symbol in turn requires a

medium to interpret the phrase that accompanies it. For example, going back to the hexagram *Tun*, its hexagram phrase is:

屯：元亨，利贞，勿用有攸往，利建侯。

[Zhun (indicates that in the case which it presupposes) there will be great progress and success, and the advantage will come from being correct and firm. (But) any movement in advance should not be (lightly) undertaken. There will be advantage in appointing feudal princes.] (Legge N.d.; Accessed from the *Chinese Text Project* on 19 May 2013.)

The short length of the phrases provides a vagueness that allows any interpreter to decode it based on the context he or she is in. Encoded into the hexagrams are values meant to be interpreted. In the next line, which explains the meaning of each line, the values are further elaborated with short phrases. These phrases used to provide guidelines such as how to govern the country (in its historical context that would refer to *Zhou* and its war with *Shan*) and establish close links with neighbouring countries.

In a basic interaction between gods' hexagrams and spirit mediums, a spirit medium follows the hexagrams and lines when they perform their rituals. Hexagrams play an important role in rituals and it is the second difference between the two systems of binary numbers. A different order of hexagrams will create different divinations and any given order prompts the user to interpret the hexagrams according to the given signs. The accompanying meanings of the hexagrams and lines are guidelines and the hexagrams can be placed together in different permutations which then give us different "values." The key point is to understand them as symbols; as such it is often open to interpretation and repetition. Because these symbols are so open-ended yet so rich and specific in meaning, they have been used for fortune-telling, *feng shui*, and weather forecast, to determine what one should do on a particular day, and etc.

Hexagrammic symbols operate as codes. I view the binaries of *yin* and *yang* as depositories of data. To access the data, one must understand the combination of codes and order them into a meaningful discourse. The combination of binaries determines what the data can do. By selecting a particular combination of symbols, in computer terms, these hexagrams work as depositories of information which can be retrieved and reused within a lunar year. Similarly, when we store our digital data as binaries of 1 and 0 in hard disks, photographs on Instagram, and documents in cloud storage software, they are all counted in bytes or bits and it is the various combinations of bytes and bits and the permutations that reproduce the data for a digital interface. The *Yi Jing* writes:

> 是故，易有太极，是生两仪，两仪生四象，四象生八卦，八卦定吉凶，吉凶生大业。[In (the system of) the Yi there is the Grand Terminus, which produced the two elementary Forms. Those two Forms produced the four emblematic Symbols, which again produced the eight Trigrams. The eight trigrams served to determine the good and evil (issues of events).] (Legge 1882)

Bits are rarely found alone in computers. They are grouped in an 8-bit bundle. It is probably a coincidence that this is also the case for the Taoist hexagrams. In both cases, there are benefits in bundling bits/lines into 8-bit/line collections. With 8 bits in a byte*,* you can represent 256 values ranging from 0 to 255, for example:

0 = 00000000

1 = 00000001

2 = 00000010

...

254 = 11111110

255 = 11111111

Each byte can store data in various ways, depending on the file format. For text documents, such as the one I am now typing on in the course of producing this chapter, the

ASCII character set may be used, where each binary value between 0 and 127 is given a specific character. This is further extended to common foreign languages, where the next 128 characters are used for special characters such as accented characters and thus the full range of 256 characters or values are used.

Standard codes such as the ASCII character set function by attaching a value to one 8-bit byte in a sequence of operations such as word processing. This word processing is made accessible by our keyboards where we type the alphabet letters which is another system of symbols. These processes echo the sequence of hexagrams and the system of *Yi Jing,* which in turn helps to determine each step and the order of religious rituals. By ordering the hexagrams in specific sets and combinations, the sum total of the values will provide the general meaning, which is then decoded by an interpreter (a priest, fortune-teller, or spirit medium).

What I suggest here is an analogy: the traces of ancient Taoist knowledge have found their way into computer technology and are re-engaged as computer symbols. There is more to be said about the persistence of traces beyond the live enactments of gods in rituals. The very structure of the Taoist rituals is computational in its formulation. Taoists believe that the deities impart the knowledge of trigrams to the kings, who had knowledge of the universe. Emperors of ancient Chinese dynasties were themselves shamans and "sons of heavens" (天子). [15]

In the *Yi Jing*, it is also explained that the heavens produced heavenly beings to impart wisdom to "wise men" and these wise men were called to decipher the heavenly messages:

> 是故，天生神物，圣人则之；天地变化，圣人效之；天垂象，见吉凶，圣人象之。河出图，洛
> 出书，圣人则之。易有四象，所以示也。系辞焉，所以告也。定之以吉凶，所以断也。

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[15] For an illuminating account of how political authority is achieved through the *Yi Jing* and the emperors role as shamans or spiritual leaders in ancient China, see K. C. Chang. 1983. *Art, Myth, and Ritual: The Path to Political Authority in Ancient China.* Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press.

[Therefore Heaven produced the spirit-like things, and the sages took advantage of them. (The operations of) heaven and earth are marked by (so many) changes and transformations; and the sages imitated them (by means of the *Yi*). Heaven hangs out its (brilliant) figures from which are seen good fortune and bad, and the sages made their emblematic interpretations accordingly. The *He* gave forth the map, and the *Lo* the writing, of (both of) which the sages took advantage. In the (scheme of the) *Yi* there are the four symbolic figures by which they inform men (in divining of the lines making up the diagrams); the explanations appended to them convey the significance (of the diagrams and lines); and the determination (of the divination) as fortunate or the reverse, to settle the doubts (of men).] (Legge 1882, Chapter XI)

The discussion of digital technology alongside computer machines is not to confuse them as equals. Instead, it helps to inform the processes that go into understanding both unique practices: Taoist rituals and computer programming. Clearly, these practices are performed by human subjects. The key point is that the human subjects must interact with the technology they have inherited or developed and build it into their activities. Ironically, the more these technologies are developed to make lives easier, the more there is a need to learn new codes and symbols to operate these technologies. I argue that these trigrams function like storage systems, where the knowledge is not lost but constantly modified. With the right tools, they can be accessed and reproduced in different contexts.

I have shown in my case study of the Nine Emperor Gods Festival how the trigrams' storage of knowledge is accessed and reproduced. The wide ranging functions that the *Yi Jing* trigrams and hexagrams perform in the organisation of human and spiritual activities can show us how symbols and numbers perform, specifically in a spiritual context. Trigrams produce networks simply by operating as nodes where gods pass their visions and energies to human subjects with the right access codes (such as a talisman or a token); gods are only accessible when human agents enact the trigrams and numbers and use them as codes and passwords to tap into the divine sphere.

The nature of trigrams shows that they are also processors of information and data. This is not to say that computers are spiritual but the invisible or rather access to the invisible is almost always done through a medium; a medium that is capable of processing and storing a lot of information and yet is also simple enough for humans to interact with by using basic units such as 1 and 0, *yin* and *yang*. Applicable to this is how new media reposition believers in relation to their beliefs. New media empowers users to "influence social and cultural engagement" but through "technical use and appropriation" (Campbell 2010, 11), it can also establish new ways for divinities and their believers to interact.

In turn, we may understand the workings of digital technology, at a basic and material level, as a complex computational system that manages and redistributes symbols into new routes of access and process. For example, the typing on a keyboard may seem like a simple activity but it is still a learned activity: we learn the positions of the alphabets on a keyboard and know what each symbol means and does. When typing, we are processing symbols and transforming alphabets into binary numbers, where at the other end (wherever that might be) they are reprocessed and the symbolic commands are analysed, thus producing the desired effect. This is all done with incredible speed and we may fail to fully appreciate or understand the process. The understanding of binary numbers, for example, has already helped me to see how one member or agent of the religious agency, such as the spirit mediums at the ceremony of sending the Nine Emperor Gods to sea, supports the operation with machine-like precision and efficiency. This is because memory (of the performance) is passed down from one agent to another, and decoded and recoded each year. In fact, the documentation of the festival has helped the next generation of temple assistants and young believers to understand and access the practice with a current digital language that they are familiar with.

Embedded into both systems of symbols (computer and *Yi Jing*) is the innate capacity to archive, destroy, and reformat. Its central thrust is to archive itself, even as it produces the future. In the example of the Taoist practice of burning paper money and paper boats, labouriously produced, it is a total production of waste. The religious practice's economy and transaction between the spirits and humans are based on the logic of destruction, in order to produce something intangible. In the example of computers, even the ASCII codes that I briefly explained must give way to new programming codes and upgrades to the system, making earlier codes redundant. While this may lead to a more efficient interface from the user's perspective, it also means more labour for the programmers.

Intimacy with the Gods

The burning of paper, though a complete waste in economic terms forms the basis for intimacy with the Taoist gods. Similarly, when codes are modified, recoded or removed, the basis is for an intimacy with the social; an engagement with a community. In *Theory of Religion*, Bataille interprets intimacy as "the limit of clear consciousness; clear consciousness cannot clearly and distinctly know anything concerning intimacy, except for the modifications of things that are linked to it" (Bataille 2006, 99). This consciousness of being intimate to a supreme being can be perceived as reacting to a kind of impoverishment (Bataille 2006, 34), most of the time expressed as a lack of fortune, wealth, and happiness. By burning paper and incense, and positing a world where the invisible being can receive those burnt offerings, it paradoxically fulfils the desire to fill the lack with the disintegration of an excess.

To a large extent, it is productive to consider Bataille's hypothesis of intimacy (with a supreme being) in the context of Taoist practices. Invented or not, the positing or even the

believing in a supreme being realises a world of real things and bodies, "established opposite a holy and mythical world (Bataille 2006, 37). To Bataille, "the real world remains as a residuum of the birth of the divine world: real animals and plants separated from their spiritual truth slowly rejoin the empty objectivity of tools; the mortal body is gradually assimilated to the mass of things" (Bataille 2006, 38). However, instead of positing a real world against a spiritual world, what Bataille truly highlights are the processes that form those binaries. It is too simplistic to recognise spirit mediums as just bodies that are supposedly possessed by spiritual beings. There is something formidably complex about the Nine Emperor Gods' devotees' attitude toward the supreme beings. The spirit is so closely linked to the body of the spirit medium that Bataille's commentary on the complex human attitude toward the body can be applied here: "the body never ceases to be haunted, is never a thing except virtually" (Bataille 2006, 40). Indeed, I concur that a human body cannot be reduced to a vessel, a medium, a thing, but as Bataille suggests, the "spirit is more present than ever: the body that has betrayed it reveals it more clearly than when it served it" (Bataille 2006, 40).

FIG. 31. Paper ashes of joss paper.
Photo: Alvin Lim

FIG. 32. Scattered joss paper.
Photo: Alvin Lim

Thus, when I rethink about the human attitude towards spiritual offerings, any "thing" that is used in relation to the spirit, in my opinion, ceases to be a thing. Instead, these practices tell us of human experience that is intimately attracted to the sacred. Insofar as I destroy the paper talisman or the incense paper, it ceases to form a distinct and opaque screen between the world and me, between god and me. It ceases to be a copy but creates the passage between humans and divinities. But for the gods to communicate and produce their signs, it is a matter of endlessly producing and destroying (burning) the possessed objects and persons. Perhaps, the endless consumption of symbols, each time produced as much as symbols are reinvented, reinforces the prohibitive force that is distance—the closer you get to god, the more it masks itself with walls, symbols and pixels. However, that has somewhat changed; the most divine act ceases to be closed to us.

FIG. 33. Rite to send the gods off.
Photo: Alvin Lim

Towards the final moments of the festival, it culminates with the spirit mediums, still

possessed, walking toward the beach. In 2011, when I first witnessed the ritual, the mediums

would step into the water and the area was cordoned off by a big yellow cloth, blocking the

view of spectators. In 2013, the ritual has been modified, and the final rite is now visible to

whomever is interested to watch or to film. The eldest sibling god gestures to his assistant,

right after some joss paper has been burnt, and the assistant first pours ashes from the temple

into the sea. Next, the god gestures again and the assistant takes up a bottle of seawater,

presumably taken on the first day of their arrival, and pours the seawater back into the sea,

signifying the gods' return to the sea. The above rite, now modified, clearly shortens the

distance between god and human. When the rite used to be obscured, it signified the sacred

quality of the final rite. However, when the procession adapts itself to fit the overall public

display and performance to the cameras, the logic of keeping things hidden is discarded.

Instead of diminishing the sacredness of the rite, it provides the devotees direct access to the

gods before they symbolically depart, strengthening their bond with their gods. This is best

exemplified by devotees standing next to the mediums performing the rite, and praying

outward to the sea. The old custom (of maintaining a transcendental distance between god

and human) is abandoned in favour of an intimate relation with the gods.

One by one, the spirit mediums, still possessed and still captured on cameras, walk back

to the main temporary altar. They pray one more time and next they go through a rite that

enables the gods to leave the possessed medium. When mediums revert to themselves and

each god seems to have left the body of each medium:

FIG. 34. Final rite before the gods leave the mediums' bodies.
Photo: Alvin Lim

The rite begins with the assistants firmly holding down each spirit medium to his

chair. They shake violently as they are held down. A *zhuotou* (桌头)[16] stands in front of the

medium and pats on both shoulders, then the joints, first the hands then the legs. He gestures

a writing, which is the same figure as in the talismans, forming a *ling* (令) or order in the

name of the Emperor God. Lastly, he rests both hands on the medium's forehead, specifically

around the acupuncture points *Shangxing* (上星) and *Shenting* (神庭). *Shangxing*, also

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[16] See Chapter 2 on definition and function of *zhoutou.*

known as *Shentang* (神堂 or God's hall) is where the blood upward flows upward in a channel as small as a star seen with a naked eye. *Shenting* can be translated to God's court or courtyard, where the second meaning suggests a liminal space by which a god can leave from. Figuratively speaking, the names of those points refer them as where a star travels up and out, and where a god can reside. Understood in a performative sense, the hand action (as seen on Figure 34) suggests that the possessing god can leave the body from those acupuncture points. The *zhuotou* finishes the spell, lifts the head of the medium. The medium stands and jerks his body, signifying that the god has left his body.

FIG. 35. One of the spirit mediums drinks a cup of water after the possession.
Photo: Alvin Lim

The difference between being possessed, and being themselves is extremely stark. However, the drinking of water immediately after the possession reminds me that they are ultimately human, and that in those long hours when they were possessed, it is the body that exerted and performed those rites and rituals. The body is exhausted and still needs the rest. When the possession is over, the binary of world of humans and the world of gods may seem

to be re-established. That is, however, not really the case. The joint realities of a virtual,

spiritual and material world posit that the gods are subjectively and immanently experienced.

Nine Emperor Gods on Social Media Platforms

FIG. 36. Screenshot of Choa Chu Kang *Dou Mu Gong* Facebook page.

The group photograph mentioned earlier is now the profile picture of the Choa Chu

Kang *Dou Mu Gong* Facebook page. Reproduced elsewhere, the image is also found on

YouTube (see below).

FIG. 37. Screenshot of a search on 'choa chu kang dou mu gong 2013'. Available at YouTube.
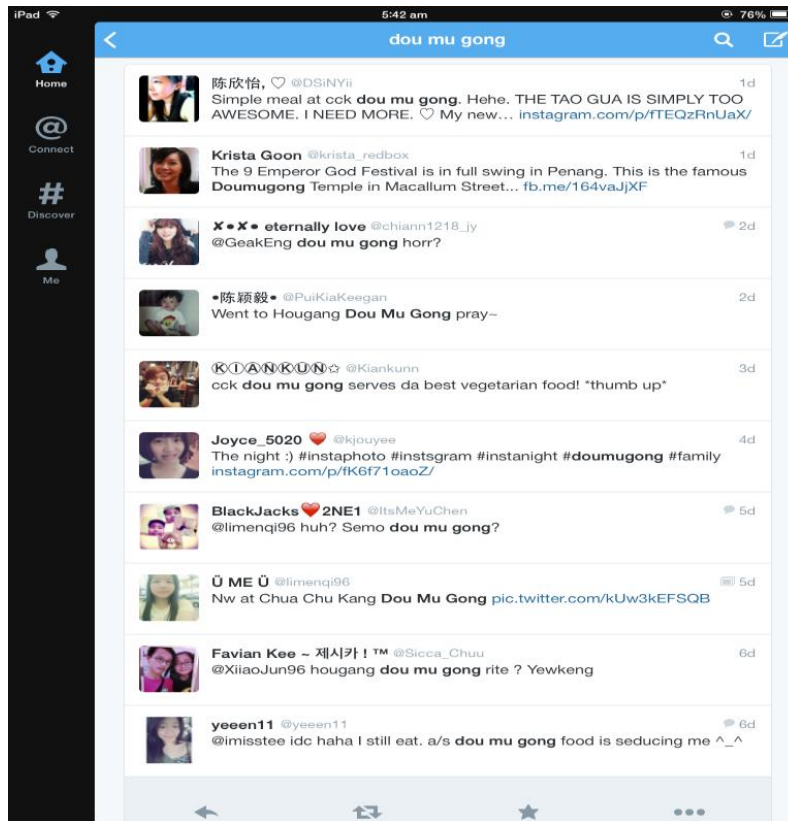
FIG. 38. Screenshot of a search on 'dou mu gong' on the Twitter platform.

Food provided by the temples is shown on the Twitter search page as one of

motivations for the younger devotees. Vegetarian food is given out for free to everyone at the

temple. It can be understood as a blessing for the believers but more importantly, it motivates

people around to gather and consume an abundance of food (cooks perpetually prepare the

food at makeshift kitchens). The eating of vegetarian food has two symbolic meanings: first

the abundance of food suggests an overflowing of prosperity and blessing; two the vegetarian

food as opposed to consuming meat frees the body from "impurity." It is prohibited to eat

meat during the Nine Emperor Gods festival if one is participating as an assistant (as seen in

the photographs with men and women in white and yellow). The consumption of meat, and

thus the killing of an animal, prevents the devotees from establishing a connection with the

gods. This religious truth is perpetuated throughout the festival and it becomes common

knowledge for the festival participants. Such truths spill online and connections now include

virtual members and Twitter and Instagram accounts.

Participants of the festival not only record their food with photographs and text, they

also readily record the rituals and upload them to various social media platforms. Facebook

"photo albums" provide interfaces for photographs and videos to be 'posted' online for

viewing. The Facebook page also informs its devotees the time and place of its festivities.

FIG. 39. Screenshot of "StevenDavid Foto", a Facebook photo album of a Facebook 'Page' consisting of photographs taken by "Steven David Foto" during one of the Nine Emperor Gods' processions on October 18, 2012.

Each video has a specific arithmetic progression that produces the search result within a

string of other search results. Hidden within the web interface is a metadata structure that

organises and distributes the videos according to "relevance" (e.g. word search), popularity

and "cookies" (another coding standard that monitors our browsing history). Every time I

access a video—through a key term or phrase—I am accessing among a tedious amount of

binary numbers, programmed and organised to form multiple symbols and codes, thus giving

the eventual display on our monitor screens, or in other words, they converge at a digital

position 5 (somewhat similar to the number 5 of the Eight Trigrams). It is within this context

that I witness the convergence of ancient memories and their reiteration by machines, and how they pave the way for connections of visible and invisible entities to form. There are users from different temples sharing, "liking" and commenting on religious material uploaded onto the Internet, just as there are users who criticise and dismiss them as frauds. The key point is that ritual performances of various temples (in Singapore and Malaysia), though varied in their rituals and interpretation of the teachings, can now be accessed and compared. Networks that are physical and that formerly required a lot of travelling are transformed on the digital stage—where spirits and gods travel wirelessly through channels and virtual spaces to re-perform their spirituality.

Though the profiles belong to human participants of the rituals, their contents are only possible through the combined performance of gods and mediums, both human and non-human. These conditions also include the non-religious interfaces, which contain advertisements and panels of unrelated and related contents. This is a more accurate reflection of religious practices in the contemporary setting, where certain religious practices are no longer only found in conventionally known sacred spaces. Furthermore, when I access the Internet for materials containing performances of spiritual and religious practices, there is the sense that the proliferation of numbers in our human operation are traces of non-human intervention or as Badiou puts it:

> We might also say that between Number, which inscribes its section in the unrepresentable inconsistency of natural multiples, and number, which we manipulate according to structural links, passes the difference between Being and beings. (Badiou 2008, 211)

Mediums bridge the difference between Being and beings, deities and devotees. Numbers and figures are re-performed and re-interpreted by the human counterparts with their own desires and agendas. The gods continue to perform online as long as the computer codes interact to move digital codes, pixels and values through cables and wave particles. The

numbers 1 and 0 or the symbols *Yin* and *Yang* are the base essentials to form an abundance of numbers and symbols, sequences and processes. By beginning with these base essentials, certain specific processes in a religious practice can be analysed in productive and illustrative ways. The popular Taoist religion in Singapore demonstrates this convergence of numbers and symbols in online social networks.

It is perhaps telling that religious Numbers can be reconfigured into other numbers such as 4-digit lottery numbers that may provide a big windfall of money. As a final shout to mark the end of the Nine Emperor Gods Festival, everyone shouts "Huat ah! Huat ah! Huat ah!" ("Prosper! Prosper! Prosper!"). Soon after, they receive from temple announcers the combination of numbers the gods have bestowed to them for their devotion, chosen by a draw of numbers from 0 to 9. And when they receive their winnings (if they do), the one-dollar coins of the Singapore currency will perhaps remind them of the Eight Trigrams.

FIG. 40. Singapore's one-dollar coin has the shape of a hexagon or Eight Trigrams.

Conclusion

Tao produced the One;

The One produced the two;

The two produced the three;

And the three produced the ten thousand things.

The ten thousand things carry the yin and embrace the yang, and through the blending of the material

force (ch'i) they achieve harmony.

(Chapter 42 of *The Lao Tzu*, translated by Chan Wing-tsit 1973, 160)

The co-presence of digital media and deities posits a plurality of positions. It also posits an oscillation between the material or "real" world and the spiritual or "virtual" world. When the codes are accessed and reproduced as performance, its addressees include the temple community and the public domain. Popular Taoist practice addresses the public because its performances are public to begin with—bright lights, elaborate costumes, spectacular rituals, bodily display, widespread acts of blessings to whoever willing to kneel and receive the deities' performative act. If one now considers the incorporation of digital media in the public performance of popular Taoist practice, which constantly generates a whole series of data (including extraneous ones), a complex play emerges. Taoist and digital technologies mutually affirm the play of data, in a certain fusion and within a certain community.

Henri Hubert writes that tools, weapons and all objects of technology are the product of various social things (Hubert 2009, 34) but I believe it goes beyond being social. The communication, re-invention and conservation of popular Taoist practices are increasingly being done through the substitutions of data. Mediation of data is essential in processing vague and generic Taoist symbols into specific tools, props and objects of technology, i.e. into a data format of a present system—whether they are religious customs passed down from generation to generation or digital technology. In other words, mediation reiterates the all-encompassing religious message and reproduces spirituality within the time frame of nine days, in multiple locations and beyond. Mediums receive the deities' message, make it transferrable and disseminate it. They multiply the message into 'ten thousand things"—stars, data and lottery numbers.

FIG. 41. Believers bow and pray as the possessed spirit medium blesses them with the
performative act of waving the flag.
Photo: Alvin Lim

The untranslatable "Tao" has "no *name* for it at all" in a Derridian sense, "not even the

name of essence or of Being" (Derrida 1982a, 26). It is not because it is strictly unnameable;

the play of names "makes possible nominal effects, the relatively unitary and atomic

structures that are called names, the chains of substitutions of names" in which celestial stars

are substituted with deities' names, numbers, and religious figures. Carried off, re-inscribed,

and re-performed in rituals and by mediums, the play of names is part of the system. On one

hand, I am describing a spirituality that has no unique name and what matters more is the

"blending of the material force" and achieving "harmony" in a chain of differing and

deferring substitutions—*Yin* substituted with 0, *Yang* substituted with 1; live performance

substituted with digital media, deities substituted with men. On the other hand, gods

possessing humans is not the same as transferring performance to digital media. At the core

of spirit possession is an intimacy with the gods—an intimacy that requires the careful

selection of mediums and recognition that not just anyone can be a spirit medium. As I have described before, when mediums go into trance, the transference is violent, painful, strenuous and sometimes even bloody. The human mediums become less of themselves. Devotees recognise that and are physically confronted by it during the actual performance. Thus, no matter how advanced digital media can be, it can never replace the sacrificial performance of the human body for the sake of connecting with the invisible gods. At the very least, however, it teaches us that human construct of binaries and how those supposed binaries actually bleed into one other.

Chapter 5

**Digital Spirits—An Interpretation of Spirit Possession: A Case Study on
Ku Witaya and Sia Chan Hong**

夫欲免为形者，莫如弃世。—《达生》，庄子

If a man desires to be without form, he should abandon the world (My translation).

Zhuangzi, from the chapter "Mastering Life".[1]

Ku Witaya and Sia Chan Hong

I. On 23 August 2008, Singapore's Mandarin evening newspaper "联合晚报" (Lianhe Wanbao) reported the suicides of two teenagers that occurred at around 5:20am. Titled "乩童与好友" (Spirit Medium and Good Friend), the report gave an illustrated account of the incident, which included a description and photographs of the surrounding area where the body was. It was a vivid picture of two 16 year olds, Ku Witya and Sia Chan Hong, jumping off a building to their deaths, apparently from the 9th level where Witaya's bedroom was. Reporters who arrived at the scene were able to find a diary lodged behind some pipes outside Witaya's apartment. In the diary was a final suicide note stating explicitly that he was "going to end everything." The day before, he wrote, "[t]here is still 0 days, and it will be the world war." The report further tells us that journals "found by reporters and now in police possession in three exercise books and foolscap pad contained scribbling of sometimes ungrammatical English numbering 40 pages and carried the two boys' names, and have led some to believe they sought their own ends." One of the entries, found under the heading, "Last day on earth," written by Sia Chan Hong, wrote: "Last day being an emperor of my

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[1] All quotes by Zhuangzi are from《老子·庄子》 (Laozi and Zhuangzi). 2009. Beijing: 华文出版社.

class. I have to kiss goodbye to my studies, Good Academic Award for this year, my teachers, my prepared exam which is the final-year exam, my dream for studies and of my classmates" (*The Straits Times*, August 31, 2008).

Reporters scurried to find answers as to why Witaya and his friend took their lives. It became clear to them at the start that Ku Witaya was a practicing spirit medium and the suicides seemed to have some connection to his religious practice but they could not confirm this. Most enigmatic was the last message of a supposed impending "world war." Witaya was thought to be with six other friends, five of whom left Witaya and Chan Hong in their room to have supper in a nearby coffee shop. When the five friends returned, they saw that the two were already lying at the bottom of the building in a pool of blood. The case became shrouded in mystery.

Friends and family refused to believe Chan Hong would commit suicide. Chan Hong's father, Mr Sia Leng Chye, 44, a hawker, told *The New Paper*, a local tabloid and quoted in the *Straits Times'* article, "that he never had to worry about his elder son's studies. The boy wanted to become an accountant. On weekends, he would help out at his parents' stall, sometimes dragging friends along for extra pairs of hands." Much less is known about Witaya. Reports say his father is a construction supervisor and his Thai mother works in a factory. Born in Thailand, Witaya moved to Singapore at a young age. His parents divorced about a year prior and he had a younger brother and sister. Besides his love for basketball and gaming, he was also good at playing the piano, which he picked up a year before. By the end of that week, it seemed that no real answers were given as to why they killed themselves. A state inquiry was ordered and it would take more investigations to determine the reason (*The Straits Times,* August 31, 2008).

A year later, a newspaper article published a summary of the incident. It reports, "On August 23 2008, Ku Witaya, a 16 year old "home-trained, self-professed Taoist medium

convinced six teenagers … to enter into a suicide pact" (*The Straits Times*, September 7, 2009). It coincided with a court inquiry that finally began in the subordinate court to determine the cause and circumstances leading to their deaths. Reporters corrected their earlier articles that stated that the five friends were not part of the suicide. They were important witnesses to the case and had two days after the suicides confessed their involvement. In a later report, as more evidence was given by the witnesses, a life of spirit possessions, online gaming and details of a close-knit group began to unravel. It turns out that the spirit possessions and their deaths have some connection after all. During weekly rituals, Ku Witaya would reportedly be possessed by gods. He prepared for rituals by first taking a bath to 'cleanse' himself as a sign of respect to the gods. Then, the topless Witaya would go into a 'trance' by rocking himself–eyes closed–back and forth on a chair. It would become apparent to those who attended his sessions which god had possessed him when he finally took up a characteristic pose and spoke fluent Hokkien, a Chinese dialect, which according to his friends was unusual for him (*The Straits Times*, September 17, 2009).

Ku Witaya had captivated his group of friends with his theory that the world was coming to an end. In the middle of 2008, he told his friends that they had to die to become "slayers" to kill demons that were threatening the world, which was soon to be shaken up by World War III. His friends agreed to sacrifice themselves to become slayers. When it came to carrying out the suicide pact, only Witaya and his close friend Sia Chan Hong saw it through by leaping out of the ninth floor bedroom window of Witaya's home. The other five did not follow suit after they saw Witaya dead at the foot of Block 667 Jalan Damai in the Bedok Reservoir area and heard Chan Hong, 16, moaning. Chan Hong died in the hospital two hours later.

II. Court records[2] revealed a more intricate idea that Ku Witaya put forward to his friends. One witness, who took the stand on 7 September 2009, aged 17 and a salesman at that time, testified that Witaya suggested the idea of the suicide pact on 21 August 2008. Two days later after a barbeque party to celebrate a friend's birthday, Witaya again spoke about committing suicide together. The same witness said that all seven of them had gathered in Witaya's bedroom and were all getting ready to jump. One of them, however, changed his mind and urged his friends not to jump. Witaya and Chan Hong decided to climb onto the window ledge and squatted there. They were to jump first. Chan Hong was "a little afraid," the witness said, so the pair climbed back in. After Witaya calmed him down, the two went back to the ledge. Moments later, they jumped, holding hands.

Another witness, aged 16 at that time, testified that Witaya had brought up the idea of suicide as he wanted to know the "truth" of his beliefs. Asked by State Counsel Ang what everyone thought of the suicide pact, he replied that they were "passionate" about it. Chan Hong was thought to be the most passionate and Witaya was a firm believer that they would all return as "slayers." The word 'slayer' appears in their diaries, and Chan Hong's diary mentions the word "SLF," which reporters speculate might be an abbreviation for a multi-media computer game.[3] Further investigations by the reporters, though, suggested a week

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[2] Taken from *The Straits Times'* initiated online archive, called *STOMP*, where people can access accounts of past significant events in Singapore and they can post comments. Parts of the court transcripts are provided on the following link: http://thecourtroom.stomp.com.sg/stomp/courtroom/case_of_the_day/248264/Teens_leader_said_theyd_die_and_return_to_save_the_world.html. Accessed 2Those transcripts have been paraphrased and summarised above.

[3] When reporter first saw "SLF" in Chan Hong's diary, one reporter checked online and thought that "SLF" referred to an online game which had an Internet community that followed the game. I did a check on my own and found out that reference to 'SLF' is commonly known with online game communities as the short name of a "Freelancer" clan "Sirius Liberation Fighters [SLF]" (From a forum entry dated 2008/2/20 at the webpage: http://the-starport.net/freelancer/forum/viewtopic.php?topic_id=70) of the renowned online game *Guild Wars*, developed by Arenanet and first released in 2005. It is a series of online 3D fantasy role-playing video games. "SLF" is one of the most competitive and lasting clans. See a wiki-page describing the history of this clan at http://wiki.guildwars.com/wiki/Guild:Shiverpeaks_Liberation_Fighters_(historical). The official corps members, as I observed, reminds me of the same naming that Witaya's group adopt that I will examine later. I must also add that "SLF" is also an Internet slang or abbreviation for "Sounds Like Fun". But it is evident that 'SLF' refers to the formation of a guild or clan, where it is the norm to have short-forms for names of guilds and clans. As proof of this, in Chan Hong's diary, which I have an image of (Figure 43) shows that below "SLF" are the names of the "generals" of Witaya's supposed online clan/guild.

later that it referred to "Sexy Little Fellows" or the name of their group[4] (*The Straits Times*, August 31, 2008). Reporters also revealed that the diaries were hidden because they wanted to keep things under wraps, as it was "very complicated" to others outside the group. When Deputy Public Prosecutor (DPP) Ang Feng Qian asked one of the witnesses what prompted Witaya to raise this idea, he replied: "He wanted to prove to others what he believed, (whether) it was the truth or just imagination." State Coroner Victor Yeo then asked if the only way to prove Witaya's theory was to commit suicide. David, whose real name cannot be revealed due to a court order, replied: "Because there is no other way. It's the reality world... no other way to prove a spiritual thing." He added that all of them had hesitated at some point about joining the suicide pact because "every human fears death." David confessed that they eventually agreed to it because "all of us wanted to find the evidence of slayers" (*The Straits Times*, August 31, 2008).

The investigation officer, Senior Staff Sergeant Edward Wong, said Witaya had been introduced to Taoism by his grandmother, Madam Goh Lim Choo, 62, who was formerly a spirit medium. Witaya had first helped his grandmother when she performed her own rituals. When Witaya replaced his grandmother as a spirit medium, he also used their house as a private temple, where he held his own rituals and went into a trance. His father, construction contractor Ku Kim Huat, 40, persuaded him to finish his O levels before becoming a full-time spirit medium. Investigations also showed that in 2006, the group had played war games and the computer game *Slayers* (*The Straits Times*, September 8, 2009).

Two concepts, first the idea of slayers returning to kill demons and second the practice of being possessed by gods and spirits were fused by Witaya. DPP Ang, in his questioning of John (not his real name), the other witness, shows this blurring of boundaries:

DPP Ang: How did you all prepare for World War III?

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[4] See Figure 43 for the reference to "SLF" as an acronym for "Sexy Little Fellows."

John: Previously we failed a few times... for World War III to come, so we try to work harder at meditating. We spent four hours a day for meditation.

Mr Yeo: So what was supposed to happen after the World War appeared?

John: We would use our bodies to fight demons and everyone can see.

DPP Ang: Why do all of you have to die to fight demons?

John: (So that) more chances to let World War appear. We would go to heaven and don't have to stay on earth to wait for World War to appear.

Mr Yeo: Why do you all want World War to appear?

John: Firstly, to see what we'd been preparing for the past years (come true). This world has changed... a lot of greediness.

DPP Ang: Did Witaya tell you how to prepare yourself to fight the demons?

John: Get ready and try to remember the dream, and to go to sleep at the time given.

DPP Ang: What do you know about the wars and the demons?

John: ...(Gives a blank look)

Mr Yeo: So in the dreams you're supposed to fight the demons?

John: Yes. (*The New Paper*, September 10, 2009)

It was revealed that Witaya started performing trances about two to three years before the incident and his grandmother had also performed trances since she was about 30 years old after an accident in which she fell down and broke her arm. Witaya believed that he could communicate with the "Gods of Heaven and Hell." In early 2006, six of Witaya's friends found out about his ability to be possessed after seeing him in a trance. Since then, they would meet at Witaya's flat every Friday to conduct rituals and to meditate. Also in the group was Witaya's younger brother. They treated the place as a temple, which they named Sheng Long Fu (Mandarin for House of the Almighty Dragon) and over time, the group became close. They made Witaya their group leader.

1

Taoist Influence, Spirit Mediumship and Syncretised Taoist Practices

I. This is an account based on what I understood from the reports, interviews, accounts and even a local media representation that was broadcasted as an episode of a television series called "Unnatural." The witnesses' testimonies show a complex interaction between shamanistic practices and online gaming. Although it was not well explained by witnesses, and one even testified that he did not believe in Witaya's theories, it is clear that the two were often talked about as if they were to be understood together.[5] This chapter tells the story of Ku Witaya and Sia Chan Hong and attempts to explain what remains unexplained. How is it that online avatars and spirit possession are spoken together? How can Witaya's theory be understood beyond being just a desire to 'prove' his beliefs but as a result of a complex fusion of forms? What happens when humans desire to be spirits and envisage their supposed divine realm as virtual spaces (World Wide Web)? Does this reveal more about the digital media involved or the nature of spirit possession; or both? I shall look at both online gaming and spirit mediumship individually whilst finding the possible interactions and intersections of the two. I attempt to overturn the media representations of the incident. Witaya's case may be most extreme in that it resulted in him killing himself, but it is a radical example of how spirit possession and digital media can be integrated as a virtual possession.

Witaya's dual role-playing of a spirit medium and an online 'slayer' permitted several substitutions and interplay between elements of online gaming and shamanistic rituals. At Witaya's disposal was an abundance of signification employed to perform an access to the unknown. Played to its extreme, Witaya convinced himself, and others, that he could obtain a virtual presence by destroying his human body. With the virtual body, Witaya thought that he

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[5] See *The New Paper*, 11 Sept 2009. Available at
http://news.asiaone.com/News/Education/Story/A1Story20090918-168684.html

could be a spirit. Influencing Witaya's beliefs may have been Taoist teachings of how body and spirit are conceived. More essentially, this is a fusion that occurs in a space that is nebulously digital and spiritual.

To get closer to Witaya's process, the structures that Ku Witaya adopted and fused together are important to the analysis. As mentioned, he was introduced to Taoism by his grandmother, who was herself a spirit medium. As an introduction, I have also selected a YouTube clip to illustrate the specific characteristics of Witaya's possession rituals that his friends described: physical embodiment of a god and language. Most pertinent to the analysis is how the characteristics may lead to the influence and adoption of digital media.

FIG. 42. Screenshot of a YouTube video that shows a female spirit medium during a spirit possession.
Source: YouTube

II. In the first clip, we see the transformation of a female medium into a male child deity, named Red Boy (simplified Chinese: 红孩儿) and she strikes several poses, most notably the kicking of her legs and the pouting of her lips.[6] The spirit medium begins by holding three joss sticks in her hands, a common number and pose for devotees to pay their

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[6] "镇山宏安廟庆中秋有奉请红孩儿", uploaded to YouTube by 'kelee'. Available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0v8YA89oYQM .

respects to a god. Three sticks signify the three realms of heaven, earth and humanity, which include the deceased (Chinese: 天地人). Her hair is tied in two small tails with red strings. We can see that she is not quite fully clothed in costume, wearing a maroon T-shirt and a pair of ornate floral pants. It is not clear when or how the god possesses her but with a grin on her face, she now includes elaborate leg movements to her physical expressions. One user, "cubecakes" describes this as a 'Dance, Dance Revolution' dance move. As if responding to the repetitive clang of the metal 'gong', she dances, all the while maintaining the reverent pose of raising the joss sticks. Her lips pout and a nearby assistant gets the cue to pass the pacifier to her, thus completing her transformation from an adult female to a child deity. However, it is more than that: her performance incorporates symbolic elements of 'heaven', 'earth' and 'human'. While the 'heaven' remains invisible, everyone dutifully addresses it either by standing close to the deity or facing the altar where the statues of gods are. At the same time, the medium's storming of the ground announces the arrival of the god in the human body and positions herself in between heaven and earth, as the vessel of the visiting god. Humans then react almost instinctively to the transformation and co-participate in the act.

It is perfectly fine for the spirit medium to be dressed in clothes that she normally wears, outside of her religious practice. I noticed that spirit possession is not always defined by a perfect execution or complete makeover in costume, hair and make-up. It occurs naturally alongside otherwise human forms because it is first and foremost a human activity in the company of spirits and gods. At this point, it must be noted that a female medium is equally capable of embodying a male god, as long as the right conditions are met. In fact, this is not dissimilar to the choices one can make while selecting an avatar/character for an online game. The real or virtual costume furnishes the identity and the body becomes less of a limitation for gods to be portrayed by a spirit medium.

While we see in the first clip the theatrical transformation and the spirit possession occurring in sequence, unison and symbolism, there remains an uncertain aspect of the experience. This uncertainty, I suggest, manifests most prominently when I observe the changed behaviour of a spirit medium. The spirit medium usually performs actions that are in profound contrast to what the person is known to be capable of. Take speech for example. It is common for a person who does not speak a certain dialect to be fluent in it when possessed. During such changes, I often struggle to make sense of the performance of speech, both in terms of what is literally said and what it means in relation to the whole experience.

III. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the Hokkien language spoken by spirit mediums when possessed is a more archaic form of the dialect, not often spoken even by Singaporean locals. In Witaya's case, his sole ability to communicate to the gods, which was reflected by being able to speak in Hokkien while being possessed, underlines an authority over the others, who did not act as interpreters or assistants during his rituals. Instead, they were only told to meditate and could not participate on an equal level with Witaya. Witaya not only professed to have a supposed higher knowledge of gods and spirits, he performed his relationship to them as a medium that could be possessed by Taoist deities and thus gain the ability to communicate in a different dialect. He was also in the position to believe in his theory that there are demons threatening the world because he was always the first and only person to (physically) experience the possession. Recalling the examples of trance possessions in earlier chapters (see for example Figure 2), trance possessions, by virtue of its intensity and transformations, naturally draw attention and influence the surrounding participants to react immediately to the person in trance. Those manifestations or transformations imply efficacy and thus influence over others. Largely due to the efficacy of the trance, Witaya's rituals, transformations and speech changes drew the other members to participate intimately, as testified by his friends.

IV. Like Jean DeBernardi, I concur with Thomas Csordas that "the anthropological analysis of religious imagery should reconcile "language and experience, representation and being in the world" (Csordas 1994, 81 quoted in DeBernardi 2012, 81). Switching between interviews and analyses from scholars of Chinese religious systems, DeBernardi constructs an on-going reconciliation of Taoist philosophy and experiences of temple worshippers in Penang. The result is an interesting dialogue between Western discourse on Taoist *Yang* and *Yin* and empirical knowledge translated from interviews with spirit mediums. For example, DeBernardi includes de Groot's analysis of Yin and Yang as "two souls or breaths," each with its own associations and subdivisions and "like the cosmos, the Chinese soul is divided into two parts, one spiritual and potentially divine, the other material and passion driven" (DeBernardi 2012, 83). She further describes de Groot's position that "we sometimes find slippage between the cosmology of gods and ghosts and tensions within the human psyche between the material soul," which in my opinion undermines the well-intended description on *Yin* and *Yang* as a dualistic system. DeBernardi cites a spirit medium and writes:

> *Taishang Laojun*'s [太上老君] spirit medium: The deities are on different planes. Heaven and hell have no gates. You are welcome in both places. It is up to you to choose, to choose good or bad habits. Heaven and hell by the right definition actually live in the heart. When the heart stops, you will know where you will be.
> The planets have altitudes. Heaven and hell are not visible to human eyes, but are very near to us, we are on a very close plane to heaven and hell, like two mountains coming down to a plain. This is why some people can see ghosts and demons, why they want to communicate with deities and god. (DeBernardi 2012, 83)

DeBernardi is much more thoughtful in her analysis of the slippages between the supposed duality of the Chinese soul or gods and spirits with the human psyche. Gods and ghosts represent complementary aspects of the self that are dissolved only in death. More importantly, the interviewees explained that "once you believe you will find spirits who come

and claim to be this deity," and thus "faith and belief" determine the identity chosen by the god, whom this spirit medium frankly identified as a god who adopts the persona of a fictional character. Chinese popular religion, as DeBernardi correctly explains, "is not systematized, but people discuss a rich array of supernatural beings, including saints … immortals, Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and Lohans" (DeBernardi 2012, 84). The slippages between 'planes' occur more commonly and the duality of entities or "breaths" is more blurred than described by de Groot. The blurring is performatively accomplished and slippages are evoked more commonly and readily in order to constantly produce religious efficacy and exert influence over others in a religious context. Because gods and spirits are understood by believers of Chinese popular religion to be readily available, those passages between the 'planes' can be quickly accessed and Witaya was very likely able to tap into existing resources (such as Taoist tokens, gestures and talismans mentioned in earlier chapters) to provide that access.

In 1955, Alan J. A. Elliott observed spirit mediumship in Singapore and writes, "[i]n theory, the influence of a *shen* [神] is not restricted to any one spot, and can manifest itself in many places simultaneously. In practice, the presence of a *shen* is usually associated with an altar or shrine where it has become customary for him to be worshipped. It may be in a home, or it may be by the wayside (Elliott 1990, 46). Elliott translates "Dang-ki" or *tang-ki* in Hokkien, which is the term for a spirit medium, male or female, and widely used in Singapore, as "divining youth" (Elliott 1990, 47). He observed that "youths of under twenty are the most suitable candidates" (Elliott 1990, 46), a category which Witaya would definitely have fallen under that category. He also lived in a home that had an altar of statues of deities, where it was customary to worship the gods and offer gifts to them at home. Like DeBernardi, Elliot points out the unique understanding of and direct interaction with deities, i.e. being accessible when called upon, that young mediums have in particular. Elliot's

explanation is that "youths of under twenty are the most suitable candidates—particularly those whose horoscopes are reckoned to be 'light', i.e. their eight characters, derived from the year, month, day and hour of birth do not include a proper weighting of the more stable elements" (Elliott 1990, 46).

While discussing the phenomenon of youths being spirit mediums, Uncle Cheong first explained to me in Singlish the reason why spirit mediums can invite different gods. The planes of gods are accessible not only because of their proximity to human mediums but they are also accessible in stages, depending on how strong the connection is with a deity:

> [The] Monkey God has different stages, or 化身 (*Huasheng* or avatars), even if it is the same god, they can come [to many mediums]. They are spirits. To me, I never question that one [sic]. If they are gods, they can go into different mediums' bodies, depending on [sic] different levels they achieved.

Witaya's friends have explained that he tapped into his ability to connect to the gods, one of which was the Monkey God. The Monkey God is a favourite deity to call upon because it allows the acrobatic deity to often showcase his superior martial skills. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the spiritual and human worlds are blurred, fiction and non-fiction are also indistinct as a supposed fictional character is widely believed to be a deity. His supposed proximity to the planes of heaven and hell helped him to embody the god. While discussing the Monkey God, Uncle Cheong further explains that each god has different avatars because each god may have different roles such as *Wu* (武 or protector and guardian versed in martial arts) or *Chou* (Chinese: 丑 or clown). This aligns with DeBernardi's own experience of an array of supernatural beings. It is precisely this world of supernatural beings in proximity that Witaya and his friends experienced. Witaya's own active involvement in his grandmother's rituals showed him how a possession was performed, and how close this invisible world really was to him. The constant proclamation of a god, here and there

simultaneously articulates an imminence of spirits which is at the heart of spirit worship; a faith that confirms the availability of a god to perform alongside the mediums. When the spirit medium in the second clip stared at his own statue, god multiplied; he was both there and here. As mentioned earlier, god possessions can take place simultaneously in different temples in Singapore, Thailand, Penang and Malacca and gods will be available in all those places at the same auspicious hour.

Part of this understanding of the availability of gods can be connected to how Uncle Cheong explained the concept of avatars—as roles or representative characteristics of a divine being. It can be said there is no single origin where a god is, but the immanence of a god is understood as its ability to be close by without losing its essence. Witaya understood gods as 'avatars' and characters in terms of how they were to be performed. For example, the performances of the Monkey God are often similar to how the Monkey God is performed in Chinese opera (M. Chan 2006, 53). For deities that have several avatars, Chan also describes the various avatars of *Nezha*, the Red Child deity that Singaporean *tang-kis* can perform: "*Tang-kis* of the Baby Nezhe will often suck on a soother, *tang-kis* of the Lotus Nezha wear lotus costumes, while *tang-kis* who portray the Divine Nezha carry a flame-tipped lance. … The Nezha *tang-ki* as warrior chief of celestial soldiers usually performs the fiercest self-mortification. *Tang-kis* who pierce their flesh with the skewers of the generals of the five directions are calling upon Nezha and his armies to help them do battle against evil" (M. Chan 2006, 52). Possession, as I understand it, is not so much the direct possession of the whole being of the god, but in performative terms, the efficacy of a spirit medium in being able to embody one of a deity's avatars. And this, as Uncle Cheong explained to me, is dependent on how connected the medium is to the god who chooses his medium.

With such narratives and performance conventions feeding the imagination of Witaya, it is no surprise that Witaya could conceive the same good versus evil narrative. This good

versus evil narrative is further expanded into the digital medium, a point that I will later discuss in greater detail.

V. Having considered the performative aspect of syncretised Taoist practice in Singapore, it is also worth mentioning that the practice also derives its teachings from Zhuangzi.[7] After Witaya and Chan Hong had jumped to their deaths in August 2008 believing that they would be resurrected to save the world, the Taoist Federation of Singapore, in response to the coroner's inquiry, emphasised that "it promotes Taoism as a religion that is more philosophical than supernatural" (*The New Paper,* September 25, 2009).

The statement prompted about 60 mediums and priests to disagree and they insisted that their practice of spirit mediums is a historical and spiritual part of the Taoist culture. They threatened to break away from the federation and to form their own federation. They demanded that the present federation represent the spirit medium and recognise his / her "unexplained ability to connect with the gods" (*The New Paper,* September 25, 2009). In November 2009, the federation sent registration forms to an estimated 300 temples affiliated to it. A register of mediums, or *tang-ki* in Hokkien, will be set up and in future a spirit medium will require a license. Though the federation still attempts to institutionalise the practice of spirit mediums, this shows that they recognise spirit mediums as a legitimate part of Taoism. It is significant because it acknowledges that Taoist philosophy can be interpreted as spiritual practice or even spiritual techniques. Witaya's vision of godhood is an interpretation of Taoism and I think there is some connection to Zhuangzi's discussion of the

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[7] Zhuangzi here refers to both the name of the second foundational text of the Taoist philosophical and religious tradition and the author of the text of *Zhuangzi* or *Zhuangzhou* (庄子 / 庄周). It is, however, unclear whether there is any historical truth to his existence. As Russell Kirkland argues, "The Chuang-tzu known to us today was the production of a thinker of the third century CE named Kuo Hsiang. Though Kuo was long called merely a 'commentator,' he was in reality much more: he arranged the texts and compiled the present 33-chapter edition. Regarding the identity of the original person named Chuang Chou/Zhuangzi, there is no reliable historical data at all." See *Taoism: The Enduring Tradition*, 33-34. New York: Routledge.

way of the perfect man. The 'perfect man' seems to be momentarily achieved and rigorously

performed by Witaya during his spirit possession:

> 至人潜行不窒，蹈火不热，行乎万物之上而不慄。 (The perfect man can walk under water without
>
> drowning, can tread on fire without getting burned and walk among ten thousand things without being
>
> frightened).

> Zhuangzi, Chapter 19, "Mastering Life"

It may even be applied to spirit mediums that can perform those deeds as above.

Zhuangzi, citing the Taoist priest Guan Yin (关尹), provides an answer when Guan Yin

answers how the perfect man acquires his powers:

> 是纯气之守也，非知巧果敢之列。居，予语女。凡有貌象声色者，皆物也，物与物何以相远？
>
> 夫[8]奚足以至乎先！是色而已。则物之造乎不形，而止乎无所化。夫得是而穷之者，物焉得而止
>
> 焉！彼将处乎不淫之度，而藏乎无端之纪，游乎万物之所终始，一其性，养其气，合其德，以通
>
> 乎物之所造。夫若是者，其天守全，其神无郤，物奚自入焉！

> —《达生》，庄子

(Because he holds and guards a 'pure breath'—it has nothing to do with wisdom, skill, determination or

courage. Sit down and I will tell you how. All that have faces, forms, voices and colours—these are all

mere things. Why then are there differences between things? And how could any one of them be worth

considering as a predecessor of the other? They are only forms and colours. But things hide their forms

and leave traces in endless change. If one fully understands the full extent of this principle, then nothing

can stand in his way! Such a person will not exceed his limit. He will conceal himself within endless

borders, wander in the ends and beginnings of ten thousand things, unify his nature, nourish his life

force[9], fuse his virtues with virtuous actions, and thereby connect with nature and understand how it

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[8] "夫" can only refer to a man.

[9] "气" is a particularly difficult Chinese character to translate into English. The meanings can be gas or air, it
can refer to the natural phenomenon involving hot and cold air, or refer to life forms breathing, scents of things,
human states or emotions, behaviour or attitudes, or used with composite words to mean different expressions
such as anger. The translation here refers more closely to how Traditional Chinese Medicine uses it, which is to
refer to the inner flow, energy or life force that drives and connects the vital organs and ensures that they are
working well. Or it can refer to "元气", the life force of a person in Taoist terms. There is no close translation to

creates. If you are such a man, whose heavenly constitution is kept whole, whose spirit has no crevice, then nothing can overcome him![10])

Zhuangzi, "Mastering Life."

There can be at least two interpretations to the above passage. It can be presented as a philosophical concept but spirit mediums in Singapore manifest this concept in very concrete terms: the connection with a god is the way by which they connect with nature and understand how the gods and nature work together to create and to establish flows of life. A spirit medium understands that a god is not a predecessor of the former and sees things as faces, forms and colours that leave traces and are in constant change. The god will become part of a medium as much as he or she becomes part of the god. Spirit mediums reiterate gods by repeating previous gestures, faces, forms and colours that have salience to viewers, as coded from accepted past traditions. At the same time, these are traces and are in constant change.

Witaya, however, had taken it further, and engaged the gods as not only philosophical and spiritual entities, but even virtual ones. This is not surprising, if faces, forms and colours are used to describe digital forms. A person who wishes to attain 'perfection' must be able to grasp the principle of forms and manipulate them. But before that, he or she must also substantiate the claims. Ironically, it is not online slayers that Witaya and Chan Hong return as, but as digital memories and traces.

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the Chinese character so I chose 'life force' as the closest translation. I hope that it expresses an invisible force within a person that can be cultivated and controlled, a possibility that Zhuangzi is suggesting.

[10] This translation follows most of the translated text by Burton Watson (2013, 146) but I made some changes to better reflect my own understanding of the Mandarin text.

2

The Aftermath: Blogs, Eulogies, Online Memorials and Criticism

I. Friends of Witaya and Chan Hong expressed their shock and sadness on their personal online blogs. One classmate, who calls Chan Hong "wifey," expresses her grief on her blog:

> "you are the classmate, the best joker, the best chairman,
>
> the most helpful, the best friend, the best wife ever.
>
> i'll miss you and all our marathons.
>
> your smile and your jokes.
>
> your everything.
>
> i hope you rest in peace, chan hong.
>
> i miss you wifey...."[11]

Chan Hong's girlfriend, who called Chan Hong "hubby" mourned for him by constantly updating her blog with entries about how much she missed him. For a year, she wrote as if he was still around or could be reading her entries. Her last entry calling him 'hubby' was exactly a year after he passed away.[12]

In one of the exchanges between David and the DPP, John told the court he still believed in Chinese gods, but not in slayers. Explaining the change, he said: "After they died, we did not see any evidence (of them becoming slayers to save the world). As for David, he told the court: "(My) trust faded because there were no results I could see in reality." The court heard that some members of the group were avid players of "Romance of the Three

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[11] Retrieved from http://zapmyshoes.livejournal.com/32516.html, Accessed on Mar 11, 2013.
[12] Please see http://unwrittenkismet.blogspot.co.uk/2008/12/hey-hubby-i-miss-you-alot-although.html?q=chan+hong. Accessed on Mar 11, 2013.

Kingdoms" and "World of Warcraft." They concluded that there was no evidence the games had influenced the suicide pact (*The New Paper*, September 10, 2009).

With each passing year, the validity of Witaya's theory fades. This is best expressed by Carl, one of the friends at the scene, who was already sceptical of his theory before the jump. He agreed to be interviewed by the reporter, Chong Shin Yen, from *The New Paper*. Carl told Chong that "as Sia Chan Hong, 16, screamed in pain from the injuries he suffered from falling nine storeys, his friend, Carl, then 17, simply sat there and looked at him." (*The New Paper,* September 19, 2009) He told *The New Paper*:

> "Console him for what? He was going to die anyway. 'He was screaming in pain and I couldn't even make out what he was saying."

The reporter, along with State Coroner Victor Yeo surmised that the group of friends were immature. In the interview with *The New Paper*, Chong relates how Carl laughed as he recounted the events of that fateful morning. He writes:

> They had wanted to hold hands and jump off the roof of Witaya's block at Jalan Damai. But the door to the roof was locked and the eight boys, aged 12 to 17, decided to jump from Witaya's ninth-floor flat at Block 667. Yesterday, Mr Yeo recorded a verdict of suicide for both Witaya and Chan Hong. Carl said that while they were in Witaya's bedroom, one of the boys cried when he realised that the rest were serious about going ahead with the plan. Andy, 17, was afraid and wanted to back out. So they mocked him. (We are not using their real names following a court order against naming the surviving members of the pact.) Carl was tight-lipped when asked about what Witaya—the leader of their group and a self-professed medium—told them in the room. But he was candid and, at times, amused when he described how Andy had tried to persuade them to give up their plan. Carl recounted animatedly: 'He (Andy) was sitting on the floor crying, stomping his feet like a little child and begging us not to do it.' When asked if any one of them had consoled Andy, Carl replied: 'No, we were all laughing at him. He's so big(-sized) and he was wailing and flailing his arms like a spoilt child.' Carl said that the mocking went on for about 15 minutes. The group then decided to lie to him to get him to leave the flat. 'We repeatedly told him that we won't jump, and he finally agreed to go home,' he said. Andy took a cab home to play online games. He was convinced that his friends had changed their minds and so did not sound the alarm. Carl also said

the group was not forthcoming with the police in the beginning. They told the police that they had gone out for supper and did not know what happened. "The police officer was fuming mad when we refused to tell them the events leading up to their deaths," said Carl. "We decided to tell him the truth only because someone had already spilled the beans." The group remains close till today. During the two-day coroner's inquiry, the boys, including Andy, sat close together, whispering and giggling as each took turns on the stand. On weekends, the group would hang out together at one of their homes or at shopping centres. Carl said their parents all know each other. His parents also did not scold him when he told them what happened. He said he did not really believe in Witaya's tales about slayers and demons: "I don't believe in Witaya's theories. I just believed in him as a friend." (*The New Paper*, September 19, 2009)[13]

His friends also testified in court that "he seemed troubled and stressed over his parents' divorce and financial problems. One said Witaya had previously mentioned that death will solve all his problems. A diary entry by one of the witnesses was also read in court. The entry said he was now going to be a slayer and that he cannot be a doctor or a lawyer when he grows up" (*Channelnewsasia.com*).[14] The same article also mentioned that the Singapore's Taoist Federation "confirmed that the HDB flat where Witaya lived was being used illegally as a temple. The federation also revealed that more than 1,000 housing flats are being misused as Taoist temples." Both the Housing Development Board (HDB) and the federation had since sent out warning notices in response to the case.

It would be too quick to dismiss the teenagers as immature. It is not a question of immaturity but the societal conditions and expectations at work alongside the relationships that the teenagers have built with each other. But there is a deeper meaning to what may seem like an isolated event. Even faced with the possibility of death, Andy could still return home to 'play online games'. This is proof that the influence of online games cannot be taken lightly. Also, the amount of online and offline attention that the case received also spoke of

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[13] The full article is accessible at http://www.asiaone.com/News/Education/Story/A1Story20090918-168684.html

[14] See article at http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/1003691/1/.html

its impact (it is also mentioned in overseas newspapers[15]), even though it has been understood as immaturity and perhaps heretical delusion to online communities.[16] However, this must also be understood in relation to Witaya's theory, despite doubts of its truth. Speaking to Uncle Cheong about spirit mediums who fake their spirit possessions, Uncle Cheong has some revealing things to say, though he struggled to find the right words:

> Those people who learned to be spirit mediums are those young people … probably out of curiosity, or to put a bit bland [sic], they like to show off. I'm not offending them … so those that gods come to naturally, they are [sic] more humble type. They possessed better 'quality' (referring to the 'quality' of the possession and the blessings that come with it). If the god comes to you naturally, choose you, you are more powerful and people can tell that; such as being able to solve people's problems, advise people what to do. Serious, serious, no joke!

I clarified what he meant by 'humble' and he answered that those who are 'humble' are usually the older folks. He was adamant that he stopped hearing about young teenagers being selected by the gods to be mediums. He agreed that forty to fifty years ago, it was more common for spirit mediums to be young teenagers (such as those at Witaya's age). He ended off with a hint of weariness and said, "For me, if I'm not the chosen one, I'll never be one."

Further interviews with practicing spirit mediums conducted by *The Straits Times* also support this sceptic view of Witaya's claims. They published on 19 September 2009 on page 45, the article titled "Untold numbers, unregulated practice." The reporter, Yen Feng, citing two spirit mediums, writes:

> Mr. Tan, doubting Witaya's claims, said: "The poor boy didn't know what he was doing. A deity will never ask his servant to kill himself."

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[15] For example, it received a brief report on Metro, UK: http://metro.co.uk/2009/09/08/videogame-fans-in-group-suicide-plan-392979/

[16] Some of the forum discussions can be found at http://facepunch.com/showthread.php?t=808300 and http://www.gamepolitics.com/2009/09/08/report-singapore-gamers-suicide-pact or blogs such as http://asanationsimplystares.wordpress.com/2009/10/18/case-of-the-suicide-pact-by-8-teens-in-spore-seeking-attention-or-delusional/ and http://www.sammyboy.com/showthread.php?37447-8-Retarded-Teens-Made-Suicide-Pact-2-Died-We-Need-To-Bring-In-More-Foreign-Talents

Along with another 44-year-old medium who declined to be named, Mr. Tan hinted that Witaya—as well

as the infamous Adrian Lim, who murdered two children in 1981—may have been possessed by demons

rather than deities. (Yen Feng 2009)

In the midst of all the scepticism and even cynicism of the suicides, discussions on

them soon ended after the verdict was reported on 17 September 2009. *The Straits Times*

reports that "… a state coroner recorded a verdict of suicide on the deaths in August last year

of Ku Witaya and Sia Chan Hong."[17] At the close of a three-day coroner's inquiry into their

deaths, Coroner Yeo concluded that:

"They had jumped most probably because they were determined to test their beliefs. He ruled out the

theory that the online games they played had influenced their decision, because they had no known

mental illness or pathological online-gaming habit. But he said that he was not able to rule out the

possibility that Witaya had been "disenchanted with his own life." He had his "fair share" of personal

problems: he was sad about his parents' separation, wanted to quit school and was often late for classes."

("Grandma: Boy had no reason to end his life," *Asiaone.com,* September 17, 2009.)

I shall not make the same conclusions made both offline and online. Some of them even

made a mockery out of the teenagers' actions. Instead, my concern is whether there can still

be lessons learnt and to reconsider our positions on digital media and online games.

3

The Virtual Stages: Online Games and Digital Media

I. The state have established that online gaming had no influence on Witaya and Chan

Hong in killing themselves, but obvious references to online avatar names imply a strong

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[17] The full summary of the court verdict can be found at
http://www.asiaone.com/print/News/Education/Story/A1Story20090917-168304.html

influence of digital media on Witaya's narrative and in my reimagination of his digital space. Witaya's belief that he could return as online spirits may be so far dismissed as ludicrous by many but I prefer to turn our attention to further slippages introduced by digital technology. What I wish to add to the various discussions on spirit mediums in Singapore (and Penang) is the idea of a digital space. Chan, DeBernardi and Elliott before them all claim that a wide array of myths, characters, folktales and beliefs make up the cosmology for spirit mediums. I argue that this space can be further extended to the digital realm; the encompassing nature of popular religious practices can draw its sources from a very diverse range.

My objective here is to include digital media in the discussion and consider how it can give insights to our study of Ku Witaya, and perhaps others. While I will not take the extreme position of Ku Witaya, his case gives us several possible threads to explore how the digital feature co-constitutes religious space. There are similar questions that are being raised by studies on game cultures and animation. Spiritual performances and performativity may find echoes in digital ones. This section looks at how the performativity manifested in spirit possession can be adapted and thought to be similar to the virtual possession of avatars. A medium space is what I define as a space where the mediums of humans, objects and virtual entities come together to interact and produce affects and effects, created by the interplay of forms and symbols.

As mentioned, topics recently discussed on studies on game culture are relevant to my discussion. There is an on-going contention between what constitutes "real scholarship" of what is deemed as "merely virtual." Richard Page explains:

> In contrast, as a result of being part of an intellectual genealogy that has ideal forms as part of its foundation, those who study virtual worlds must often contend with the problem of studying "simulations" or "appearances," if only to justify the "real scholarship" of the "merely virtual." (Page 2012, 242)

Page summarises that there are three types of scholars, most of whom maintain the boundary between the virtual and reality in varying degrees. First, there are those who "weigh the actual world most heavily: social scientists who see virtual worlds as potential simulations of the actual world." Second, there are "those who weigh them relatively equally yet maintain the problematic, asking how real-world economics and relationships are transformed in the virtual, often demonstrating that online society is "just as real" as the real world." Citing Benedict Anderson's 1983 essay, "Imagined Communities," Page classifies the second group of scholars as those who define "virtuality" as a state of the so-called real, such as in imagined communities. To him, in these cases, "there is often an implicit weight of reality on the actual world, even as the researcher shows that online interactions are just as vital" (Page 2012, 242). Jesper Juul, in his book *Half-real*, also represents this second category and this is most clear when he writes in the beginning of his book: "the title, *Half-Real* refers to the fact that video games are two different things at the same time: video games are *real* [his emphasis] in that they consist of real rules with which players actually interact, and in that winning or losing a game is a real event. … To play a video game is therefore to interact with real rules while imagining a fictional world, and a video game is a set of rules as well as fictional world" (Juul 2005, 1). The last group of theorists are those who "argue that virtual worlds are a field of enhanced authenticity, "more real" than the actual world, since players are not tied down to fleshly fetters and can freely alter their identities, and are more free to pursue any project that they desire" (Page 2012, 242).

Patricia G. Lange, however, notes that "[s]cholars speak of the increasingly ''blurring'' realms of offline and online gaming activities." She is right in protesting that "the move to acknowledge the heavily entangled nature of online and offline worlds by claiming they are now blurred economically has in some ways ironically produced terms and frameworks that actually complicate seeing these activities as intertwined and risks perpetuating notions of

separateness" (Lange 2011, 18). Lange further points out the problem of such a distinction. When citing Williams (2006), she quotes, "like real icebergs, there is a danger to steer around: We must not drape our own ideologies, hopes, fears, suspicions on top of these questions. . . . It is our role to be agnostic about the uses and effects that gaming technology has and to provide intelligent insights and empiricism" (Williams 2006, 15). To her, she finds that the orienting scholarly framework still slips "into a familiar but problematic virtual-versus-real binary that may subtly or unintentionally transmit moral undertones and judgments." In her opinion, "by referring to games as "virtual," scholars who use a real versus virtual framework risk reifying the negative moral assessment of online games as derivative, not serious, or inauthentic in comparison to colocated experiences such as watching television" (Lange 2011, 18). This is echoed by Matthew Fuller and Andrew Goffey[18] in "Towards an Evil Media Studies":

> We use the word 'evil' here to help us get a grip on contemporary media practices of trickery, deception and manipulation. The shift to this register must be understood in the context of a desire to escape the order of critique and the postulates of representation so obviously at work in the way thinking is made available about the media more generally. To talk of an evil media studies, is to draw attention to a range and style of practices which are badly understood when explicitly or implicitly measured against the yardstick of autonomous rationality and the ideal of knowledge. Indeed, an evil media studies has immense capacity for productive use. (Fuller and Goffey 2007)

In the same webpage, Fuller and Goffey acknowledge the influence of Jean Baudrillard in their work. Baudrillard's influence on media studies cannot be neglected and his definition of the virtual could further the discussion and address the moral issues raised by Lange:

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[18] This web article has since been published in Parikka, Jussi and Tony D. Sampson, eds. 2009. *The Spam Book: On Viruses, Porn and Other Anomalies From the Dark Side of Digital Culture*. New York: Hampton Press.

> The Virtual is the ultimate predator, the plunderer of reality. Reality has generated the Virtual as a kind
>
> of viral and self-destructing agent. Reality has become prey to virtual reality. The ultimate consequence
>
> of a process that started with the abstraction of objective reality and ends in integral reality.
>
> The Virtual is not about a "rear-world" (arrière-monde): The replacement of the world is total, it repeats
>
> itself identically, a perfect lure. So the question is resolved by the sheer annihilation of symbolic
>
> substance. Even objective reality becomes a useless function, a kind of trash, the exchange and
>
> circulation of which has become more and more difficult. We have moved past objective reality into
>
> something new, a kind of ultra reality that puts an end both to reality and to illusion. The hypothesis is
>
> the following: the world is given to us. The symbolic law says: what is given must be given back. In the
>
> past one could give thanks, in one way or another, to God or any other authority, and respond to the gift
>
> by sacrifice. (Baudrillard 2005)

The question is no longer whether there is any separation between the virtual and reality. For

Baudrillard, the new reality is that the world is already given to us as such, luring us at the

same time into an "ultra-reality" that the separation between reality and illusion disappears.

The hyper-real or hyperreality, as Baudrillard calls it elsewhere and much earlier, is defined

as "a real without origin or reality" (Baudrillard 1994, 166). His treatise on simulation and

simulacrum defines simulacrum as a copy with no original, or as Gilles Deleuze describes it,

"the simulacrum is an image without resemblance" (Deleuze 2003, 257). In the same article

on violence of the virtual, Baudrillard writes:

> My hypothesis is that a kind of radical fetishism, resulting from the eclipse of every process of meaning,
>
> underlies the transformation of the real into pure information and the cloning of the real by virtual
>
> reality. … Immersion, immanence, and immediacy characterize the virtual. No more gaze, no more stage,
>
> no more imaginary, no more illusion even, no more exteriority, no more spectacle: the operational fetish
>
> has absorbed all exteriority, all interiority and even time in the operation of "real time." It is the
>
> realization of utopia. We are this way getting closer to the real world, a world "integrally" realized,
>
> affected and identified as such. (Baudrillard 2005)

The extreme negative tone of Baudrillard's treatises cannot be ignored. However, that is also precisely why it is important that theorists like Fuller and Goffey remind us that it is equally important to reflect on the productive usage of the media commonly deemed as trickery, manipulation and deception. As much as Witaya's treatment of the virtual space seems deceptive, we can still produce a productive discourse about his blending of forms and realms.

Mark Griffins, in an article titled "Online computer gaming: Advice for parents and teachers," poses the question: "Is there potential for long-term damage to an adolescent's mental health through playing online games?" He replies, "As with all addictions, there is a potential for long-term damage but the good news is that very few people appear to have developed such problems although there is research suggesting that in extreme cases, online gamers can experience all the core signs and symptoms of more traditional addictions such as withdrawal symptoms, conflict with other activities, mood modifying effects, and relapse (Chappell, Eatough, Davies & Griffiths, 2006)" (Griffins 2009, 4). There is also no evidence that Witaya and his friends are addicts of online gaming. In that sense, my hypothesis must differ from negative agendas or criticism of Witaya's acts. In fact, the question for me is not whether Witaya's act is deceptive or evil. For me, it is important to consider the perspective of the gamer that is in the position to influence and indeed affect the gaming space. In fact, I argue that the gamer has also the capacity to influence and produce new digital spaces.

Aylish Wood elaborates this idea by suggesting that a gamer creates space by bringing with it "questions about how space is constructed and by whom." She argues that "space is reconfigured through the participations of both gamers and the game, where game is understood as the programming and hardware of a game technology. Extending our understandings of the contributions of both gamer and game, the outcome of play emerges as the agencies of each are coconstituted. This space is recursive, based on feedback between

the state of the game (relations between the objects) and the state of the gamer, which includes their knowledge, skill, mood, and attention." Wood's ideas of recursive space can be developed into two ways. It gives a greater account of the participation of technology but more importantly, I think, she considers "play as a process of creating space" (Wood 2012, 88).

My starting point is not whether there is any distinction between the virtual and reality. Instead, Wood's idea of a co-constitution of various agencies is a concept I am keen to adapt to Witaya's case. Witaya co-creates with the digital space, staging the digital media alongside his spiritual performances. The digital media is engaged not so much as a direct influence on Witaya's idea of spirituality but it co-creates his digital space where they mutually inform the possibilities. Baudrillard's brief religious principle, as quoted above, may be applied here: "what is given must be given back. In the past one could give thanks, in one way or another, to God or any other authority, and respond to the gift by sacrifice" (Baudrillard 2005). Witaya's response to the media was not only a response to the world, i.e. to save it from a supposed third world war. It was a sacrifice to prove his theory that the blending of spiritual and virtual forms was possible. Witaya's virtual stage is based on his knowledge of spirituality, skill in spirit possession and his mood, which must take into account his relations to the friends and family. The presence of his brother and grandmother during his rituals showed not only a sense of having to meet the expectations of an invested family-member; being the leader of his group, it also determined the extremism of a leadership that required unwavering loyalty. This co-constitution of spaces in familial and friendship terms within digital frameworks is most exemplified and expressed by the concept of avatars. The vocabulary of the online gaming had given him the way to express his leadership and progress in his spiritual powers.

II. Avatars-Nicknames

For Witaya, one vocabulary to reconstitute and re-express offline relations is through the choice of avatars for online games. Choosing characters or avatars before the start of a new game is a common feature in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing games (MMORPG). In an ongoing study on MMORPGs, called *The Daedalus Project*, Nick Yee explains that "[f]or some players, the avatar becomes a purposeful projection or idealization of their own identity, while for others, the avatar is an experiment with new identities" (Yee N.d.) [19] In a comprehensive study on *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard 2004), authors of the book, *Digital, Culture, Play, And Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader* immersed themselves in the online game to make observations and arguments about the game. The choice of character plays an important factor in the initial experience of such online games. They not only determine the capacity or ability of the characters, and the potential powers one can receive with each levelling up, gamers also have to make a conscious decision on their online appearances. Ragnhild Tronstad, who contributed to the reader, explains that "the function of the character in *World of Warcraft* is double. On the one hand, it represents the player vis-à-vis other players in the game. On the other hand, it functions as a tool for the player's agency in the game" (Tronstad 2008, 255). This doubling is a result of the difference between 'appearance' and 'capacity'. Elaborating earlier, she defines 'appearance' as "how we perceive the character, or the projected mental image of it, which may be more or less present during play," and 'capacity' as how it "encompasses the given possibilities a certain character

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[19] Nick Yee (N.d.) also points out that offline affiliation and self-identification also play a part in choosing one's identity online: "While some might have argued that cyberspace freed us from our bodies and gave us freedom over our identities, gender stereotypes and even national affiliations transfer into these virtual worlds where male and female bodies are equal and where real world nations don't even exist. Perhaps the complications of our virtual identities derive from our insistence of embodiment in virtual worlds, and MMORPGs are showing us how easily real world privileges, affiliations and power structures transfer into virtual worlds." [Available on http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/gateway_identity.html]

type has to interact with the game mechanics" (Tronstad 2008, 253). Capacities could include "race- and class-specific skills, weapon skills, professional skills, and spell-casting skills, but also agility, speed of movement, and the character's armor and weapons. Tronstad further makes use of the concept of flow as defined by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990), as a state of ''optimal experience'' and considers 'flow' as it is experienced:

> … there must be a perfect balance between the challenges posed and the player's ability to overcome them. The challenges have to be experienced as genuine challenges, not easy to accomplish, but not quite impossible either. In meeting such challenges, the player enters a state of trance-like concentration in which the body seems to perform and react automatically as well as perfectly, without the conscious mind interfering. This state is known as flow. If the player starts to think about what he or she is doing, the state of flow is interrupted and the attempt will most probably fail. When, in *World of Warcraft*, gameplay is experienced as flow, the capacities of the character and those of the player are experienced as being in perfect balance. The player and the character are here perfectly connected, which requires that the player has internalized the controls and game mechanics to such a degree that the medium between himself and the gameworld becomes transparent. The character now becomes an extension of the player while still being perceptible as a separate identity with which the player may identify through either embodied or imaginative empathy (or both), depending, among other things, on the visual, fictional, and ludic context of the gaming situation. (Tronstad 2008, 253-254)

The experience of 'Flow' seems to parallel a Taoist spiritual possession when the player-character connection is being described as 'a state of trance-like concentration.' However, this describes a perfect scenario where the player and the character are 'perfectly connected.' To a certain degree, a frequent online game player can experience one's chosen online character becoming an extension of oneself. This is because any mastery of a game requires the player to learn the controls and mechanics of the game. This means that the player has to spend a great deal of time in front of the computer. This forces the player to extend oneself to a virtual space. While being connected to a virtual gaming world is definitely different from being possessed by a god, a player may indeed identify oneself

through 'either embodied or imaginative empathy.' Thus, it is highly possible that a player familiar with the visual, fictional and spiritual context of Taoist popular practice to compare the 'visual, fictional, and ludic context of the gaming situation' and fuse those contexts into one. One of those ways the two contexts can merge is by extending the online characters to an actual social structure, such as the social structure of Witaya's group.

'Flow' is also used to describe the warring situations or raids between 'guilds' formed within the online world. Esther MacCallum-Stewart observes that the "fundamental elements of *World of Warcraft* mean military tension within the game is clearly established from the outset. It is strongly suggested that the two factions would be at war with each other, and indeed, this is encouraged in the gameplay. The first decision a player makes when entering *World of Warcraft* is directly related to conflict. Before choosing a side, character, class, or avatar, they must choose what type of server they wish to enter" (MacCallum-Stewart 2008, 42). Avatars can make online commands and use tools, often in animated actions. More importantly, the design of MMORPGs creates a space that focuses on the development of an avatar. Bartle, who is best known for having co-written in 1978 the first virtual world, *MUD*, and for his 1996 Player Types model which has seen widespread adoption by the MMO industry, wrote in his key book, *Designing Virtual Worlds*:

> The fundamental, critical, absolutely core point of virtual worlds such as those found in multi-player online games is the development of the player's identity. (Bartle 2004, 415)

Richard Bartle's player typology or the Bartle Test was one of the earliest models to split players "into achievers, explorers, socializers, and killers" and shows how these groups can be recognized through their different strategies (Bartle 1996). Games like *World of Warcraft* are developed based on this principle: where there is always a degree of slaying involved, the gamer must choose avatars with appearances and capacities to perform the act of slaying.

Witaya's weekly rituals with his close friends consisted of other activities that include going to school together, playing games in arcade centres near their school or at home through online games and connected servers. As mentioned, one of the games they played was *World of Warcraft*. Playing the game informed them of the logic of online alliances that they could forge while playing together, which saw them create a similar hierarchy to "SLF" Freelancer clan's[20] (which were titles attributed to navy admirals) and many other clans, guilds and alliances, in a wide spectrum of online games. The leader of such gaming clans is usually a player who has the highest score or highest level in the game. In a similar hierarchy, Witaya's group consisted of a group of secondary school friends with Witaya and Sia Chan Hong as the oldest and the youngest being only twelve at that time. At the same time, Witaya's foray into the spiritual world made him more than just charismatic but he showcased his supposed exceptional ability (or "high level" in gaming terms) to his friends and called upon the gods to possess him. Every member of the group, except for one, also had a nickname in Mandarin.[21] The nicknames were known only to the other members.

The group members all had nicknames that were generic titles of Chinese war generals. Interestingly, Witaya's nickname was 'Blood Demon' (血魔), which marked him as exceptional to the rest (he was not a 'general'), and even making reference to the fictional character from a popular Chinese film, Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain (《蜀山剑侠》) or the online game 《新蜀山劍俠 Online》 (See http://zu.chinesegamer.net/). The

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[20] See http://wiki.guildwars.com/wiki/Guild:Shiverpeaks_Liberation_Fighters_(historical) (accessed on 29 April 2014).

[21] In an article published by *The New Paper* on 11 Sep 2009, the nicknames of Witaya's group were revealed: Ku Witaya's nickname: Xue Mo (Mandarin for Blood Demon); Sia Chan Hong's Nickname: Fei Yi Da Jiang (Mandarin for Flying General); John's Nickname: Hu Fu Da Yuan Shuai (Mandarin for Tiger Axe General); David's Nickname: Shadow Demon, also known as Huo Yan Wang (Mandarin for Fire King); Ben's Nickname: known as Ah Sheng in the group, who is also the one who wrote that he would like to be lawyer or doctor; Jim's Nickname: Yuan Wei Jiang Jun (Mandarin for General); Andy's Nickname: Wei Yan Jiang Jun (Mandarin for Great General); Carl's Nickname: Han Bing Wang (Mandarin for Ice Cold King)

blood demon in the film is not quite a character but a spirit or demonic energy that possesses a person and turns him into a powerful demon who threatens the world.

The naming of the group member not only consolidated their identities as friends but also allies in the online world, thus, requiring absolute loyalty to the group. Their alliance not only extends to offline relations, but online relations as well. In fact, it is not clear whether there is any difference as both spaces are interchangeable in the context of online gaming among friends who physically meet to play them and are aware of each other's online avatars.
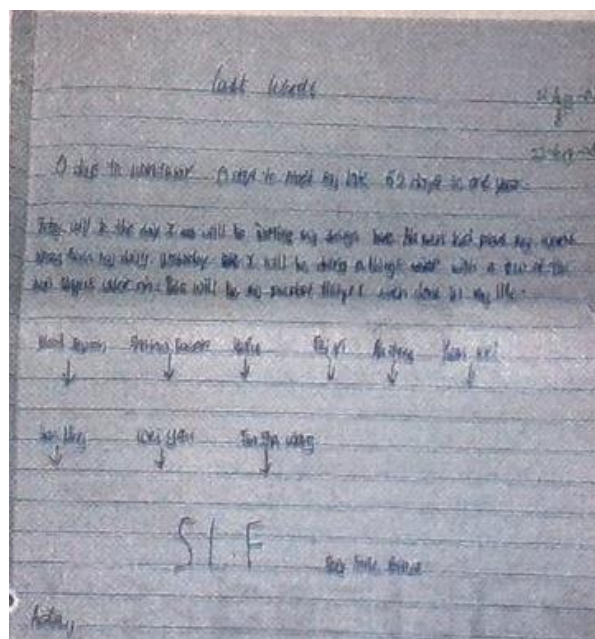

FIG. 43. Captured imaged of the Chan Hong's diary, from the article covering the suicides, on the *Lianhe Wanbao*, published on August 24, 2008, the day the diary was found.
Source: *Lianhe Wanbao*

The diagram above, captured from the newspaper *Lianhe Wanbao*, shows the diary of Chan Hong where there is a clear indication of an alliance and how they are part of their own 'SLF' or fighter clan. The names of the groups have arrows pointing down towards the clan. As 'LF' means "liberation fighters," we can see clearly how this group was formed to supposedly liberate the world from demons, a theme or narrative that is easily adapted from *Guild Wars* and *World of Warcraft*.

Naming is also significant here in the 'SLF' formation. By marking himself as different in both worlds, through spirit possession and with a unique nickname, Witaya also

consolidated his identity as leader. Thus when he attempted to convince his friends about his

bold plan to kill themselves so as to achieve god-like status, it was within this context of a

particular group/clan dynamics of loyalty, war and brotherhood that permitted the pact to

proceed. When asked to explain what 'slayers' meant, Ben later admitted: 'I don't know the

meaning of slayers but I learnt from Witaya that only slayers can save the world from

demons.' According to court documents, Ben added that at that time, the most important thing

to him in his life was to be a 'slayer' or if we based it on the Bartle Test, Ben and his friends

were attempting to be 'killers'.

Witaya's naming of himself as a blood demon is, however, somewhat more ironic than

what it seems at first. I suggest that he was himself unsure what 'slayer' means. Witaya was

familiar with the fictive reference to 'blood demon' as the evil power that threatens the

fictional world, Magic Mountain of Zu, given that it is quite a familiar reference in the

Chinese gaming community. The irony is that Witaya's plan was to save the world and yet he

might be suggesting that he was the threat. In the fictional story about the blood demon, the

possessed character could sometimes control the demon and still show signs of being sane

and human. In those periods of sanity, the possessed person would try his best to convince his

loved ones to kill him, thus freeing him from the demon.

The giving of nicknames would have been a form of playfulness and a source for

laughter and fun engagement within the group. Nick Yee also wrote in his project website,

the section on "Playing Together" that "For other players, the environment doesn't only

highlight individual differences, but it comes to shape the relationship itself through

interplays of power, dependence, and gender roles."[22] But Witaya had a different sense of

what naming does. By giving meaning to both his nickname and the names of gods when

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[22] See http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/gateway_playtogether.html and his statistics on gaming with romantic partners and family members at http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/000430.php.

possessed, he put at stake his whole body into an absolute expenditure. It is an absolute

expenditure because he literally gave his body to the visiting god, in exchange for spiritual

gifts such as the ability to speak in Hokkien or the immunity to pain when he inflicted it on

his body. It is a form of cruelty to his body, symbolically suggested by the character 'blood'

in his nickname, in exchange for the presence of god.

III. Ku Witaya's 'Avatar' Space, Co-constituted Media

Richard Page chose to trace what he calls the 'transcendental/immanence problematic'

but later departs quite drastically into a Confucian discourse on the attitudes of Chinese

online gamers. He argues that "ontological assumptions about the real and the virtual have

influenced theories of ethics in games and virtual worlds such that they cannot account for

ethical judgments among Chinese gamers. Citing the online game, *Zhengtu*, he notices that

"players do not draw a strict divide between the game and the real world, and develop their

ethics based on the idea of a holistic self that can be improved. They refer to this as the

"survival of the fittest" and see the game as a "crucible for the heart." Rather than seeing the

imbalance between wealthy and poor players as unfair, players defend abuses of power as a

just and natural part of the game" (Page 2012, 239). Page's analysis takes an interesting look

at the interconnection between the social order of the game and the social order of

contemporary China, often citing how real-life contexts and ethical attitudes correspond with

the behaviours of players in the game.

As mentioned, Witaya's real-life nicknames correspond with the naming of avatars

online. It also corresponds to their real life capabilities, especially Chan Hong who was a

class leader and excellent in his studies, and group dynamics. Furthermore, the fusion or

rather the tension between the human body and the spiritual being echoes the tension between

appearance and capacity of a chosen avatar. The avatar-player, operating within the limitations of the online system has to subject him- or her-self to the parameters of the game, making choices that would help him or her advance or even socialise in the game. In the case of the male spirit medium, we find that human consciousness impedes his godly movements. As a god, his movements are huge and violent, and he threatens to burst out of the human vessel and expand beyond what a human can perform. As a god, language becomes an impediment while in a body and human discourse only begins when a conscious human interpreter takes over and speaks on his behalf. We see the various restrictions that the human body places over the god, even as the possession also enables the human body to perform extraordinary acts. This, I believe, is the reason why Witaya was determined to remove those restrictions and conceived his theory to 'abandon' the world and his human body. Having experienced superhuman strength, Witaya discovered what he believed to be the possibility of attaining an even higher state of godhood.

If we consider how Witaya's friends described his spirit possession, i.e. performed with a combination of gestures, costumes, props and speech, the virtual world also gives Witaya the knowledge for constructing an elaborate concept of another world. His theory of 'slayer,' which is his avatar, is a background story by which his identity can be forged further than what he imagines as the limitations of his human state. Tronstad cites Paul Ricoeur's concept of a ''narrative identity'' to understand how a character identity is developed in a role-playing game (Ricoeur 1991a, 1991b quoted in Tronstad 2008, 257). Similarly, I consider the implications of this concept and how it applies to Witaya. Tronstad writes:

> According to Ricoeur, what we think of as our identity rests on the (told and untold) stories of our lives more than on the actual experiences we have been through. Actual experiences that are not retrospectively examined and narratively configured in order to fit together with the other stories of our lives have little impact on the image we create of ourselves. In our appropriation of a life story, in which we both construct and discover our identity, certain experiences we have had will count as

significant and be included, while others are seen as unimportant and are easily forgotten. When we create a character in a role-playing game, we invent a set of significant previous experiences for our character in order to provide it with a background story from which we can start constructing its identity. (Tronstad 2008, 257)

Witaya had to prove his idea because both the online world and the real world limit his access to the extreme case of role-playing, that of a digital spirit-god. It is his quest, and that of others who received his invitation, that would see him play on to its very end.

Apart from told and untold stories, however, Witaya's experience must also take into account the physical experiences that spirit possession placed him in. In spirit possessions, though the body remains in plain sight, for that brief moment of possession, the god takes away the personality and individuality of the medium. When the god takes over, the vitality of a person's life places the god on the brink of leaving. The god eventually departs, as those observed possessions suggest, leaving the body with bruises and after effects from the possession. At the heart of Witaya's physical performance is a distancing or objectifying of human bodies as vessels or mediums. That body, apart from oneself, is still a part of a general structure of "phonetic text, speech, [and] transmitted discourse…" (Derrida 2006b, 297). The idea of 'transmitted discourse' is crucial to my analysis. A medium space is produced where the human body is not the only medium that transmits knowledge or produces actions. As we have already seen, narratives, philosophies and conventions, either readily adopted or adapted with changes are combined to great effect in the practice of spirit possession.

From the perspective of an observer, a spirit medium seems first and foremost to simulate a perceived notion of how a god acts or behaves. He or she either dresses up as a god in anticipation of a possession or performs a series of movements that the god is known to make. Without knowledge or experience of how and when a god possesses a medium, the medium may appear as imitating the god. From the perspective of a god, the spirit medium is the vessel in which the god must take his shape, thus rendering himself to the form and

structure of a human discourse, i.e. speech, movement and physical actions. From the perspective of the spirit medium, he or she must give up the body, for the purpose of unifying all the perspectives of all participants in a religious event.

It is from this perspective of the medium that we must examine the mediating role and function that Ku Witaya plays. Witaya offers another perspective to the already complex interplay of perspectives. Witaya planned to achieve a higher state of being or become god through several strands of thought and action. The spirit medium, together with his or her deity, stages a medium space that is organic and has room for innovation and hybridity. Witaya employed theatrical and performative techniques that spirit mediums employ during possession, and must fully understand how it affects the participants of his rituals.

Returning to the earlier cited Zhuangzi's saying, the above description of concealment within "endless borders" seems to find traction when one describes the virtual realm. Of course, the digital domain has its own boundaries and excess, and it is not necessarily the place to 'fuse' 'virtues with virtuous actions'. Boundaries are masked and source codes are hidden. But there is still the possibility of being able to wander and communicate in multiple ways, and even influence the future design of a game. More crucially, online games, unlike conventional video games, go through multiple updates or what programmers call 'patches'. It is also possible to come back "alive" after "dying" and retry the stage or quest. At least, from the perspective of Witaya, the virtual stage provides the resources to narrate his idea of being online gods and returning to the human world to save it from destruction. When play spills over the contained stage of an immediate spirit possession of man to the virtual realm, the result is both fascinating and eerily morbid. We must see how live religious events or embodied practices are not to be considered as a 'predecessor of the other' (the other being the virtual form) but another state that one can enter into (to become the '至人' or the perfect man).

More specifically, in designing a virtual space, programmers must acknowledge the importance of user feedback. Bartle suggests that the anonymity that virtual worlds afford causes players to suggest changes without care of repercussions that are more likely in the real world. He thinks that "tinkering will take place until some kind of consensus is reached" (Bartle 2004, 410). In other words, it suggests a community of anonymous players pushing the designers to make changes to the game. Describing the ongoing 'patching' of *World of Warcraft,* Torill Elvira Mortensen describes this process where "[t]he programmers of large multiuser games endlessly ''tweak'' the code: the rules are changed to obey the inevitability of the game design. This happens on a regular basis in *World of Warcraft*. Through countless ''patches'' programmers change the code, fix errors in how it works, and change the parameters for play. With the launch of The Burning Crusade in 2007, the code went through a major update. This meant that the rules of the game changed. The update shows that code is rule in computer games, and that rules are obviously as flexible as social norms: subject to change" (Mortensen 2008, 204). Changing parameters of play based on user feedback highlights the nature of virtual spaces as places where players and programmers co-constitute the gameplay interface and thus co-create the gaming experience. New tools are constantly developed to modify existing gaming experiences. These combined features are only possible because, as the term 'Massively Multiplayer' suggests, a large community is required to provide impetus for patching changes. Because it is a large community, in order to navigate through the large landscape, it is also required for players to form alliances. In other words, it will be impossible to clear stages alone. Therefore it is always recommended to play in groups. That is also why Witaya was able to convince his friends to act in a group.

IV. Language

What draws my attention most to the comparability of online games to Witaya's spirit possession is the use of language. Esther MacCallum-Stewart and Justin Parsler note that "The first and most obvious problem is the differing levels in which people communicate in games. The act of having to type every word a character says places a remove between player and avatar, and the lack of visible or audible inflexion and body language causes a problem for other players … At the same time, players' linguistic ability is affected by vocabulary, typing speed, and adeptness at the language being typed. Realms are only available in four European languages—English, French, German, and Spanish—so many players communicate through second languages. Even in a role-playing realm, all of these factors act against those who wish to role play" (MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler 2008, 232).

In their further analysis on how online language develops in *World of Warcraft* messageboards, they note that in-game add-ons such as 'Eloquence' provide a platform to invent new modes of interaction and translation. They describe this add-on:

> … Eloquence is rather different. Billed as "an ambitious addon primarily written for role players" (*Curse Gaming* 2005), Eloquence's main function is a personal Leet translator:
>
> ne1 kno wher uc is at *!* Does anyone know where the Undercity is?
>
> lf1m rouge SCHLO *!* We want one more Rogue for Scholomance.
>
> CAN SUCK MY A$$ U FUKTARDZ *!* You can plunge into a gaping chasm for all I care.
>
> Eloquence reinscribes out-of-character speech into full sentences, and changes them into suitably in-character language. In this way it is unique, since it is not only personal to an individual player, but designed to reinterpret non role-playing actions in the game. All of these add-ons point to one thing—people want to role-play, yet they find the tools already in place insufficient. (MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler 2008, 243)

The digital add-ons may be compared to assistants and interpreters who stand beside spirit mediums when they require the help of others to translate what the god intends to say. Similar linguistic change in registers can also be noted in platforms such as Twitter with the widespread use of the hash-tag # and @, a latter symbol already common with our email addresses; a symbol of a person residing in a virtual space or email server. Though simple and tacitly accepted as they may seem to some of us now, the symbols are expressions of a kind of human abandonment—the abandonment of physical restrictions and the digital traces one can leave without being physically there. The same goes for the hash-tag, where ideas or trivial concerns can 'float' online and 'trend' for a period of time. When considered alongside the influence of the Internet on Witaya, at work here is more than a medium embodying a god. In such online environments, the new language used to communicate also suggests possible segregation based on language ability. National languages, as suggested by the MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler will determine the kind of linguistic groups operating in e.g. a guild or an alliance. Furthermore, the specific jargon used by long-time gamers, as shown in their example, mean that new gamers have to adapt to a new surroundings and it is often the new gamers who have to compromise and learn the online jargon, or if they do not understand, utilise whatever available translator add-ons they can find.

Witaya's use of Hokkien during his rituals underlines this effect. Because he could communicate in what is still deemed as the common lingua franca of deities in Singapore, he portrays himself as the 'long-time' medium. At the same time, those friends who are not as well-versed in Hokkien as he was acted as mere participants. The result is, as it is in massive online games, Witaya's role as a medium exemplary functions similarly as a guild leader who commands both the linguistic ability as well the high level to lead his alliance. I have briefly mentioned the word syncretised earlier and I would like to now expand on it to better tap on what I mean by 'alliance'.

V. Virtual-Spiritual Syncretism

Jean DeBernardi writes that the term syncretism refers more narrowly to the blending of elements from separate religious traditions. DeBernardi is correct to suggest that "[l]ike language, spirit mediumship is layered, stratum upon stratum, and a Chinese spirit medium may combine elements of widely shared ancient practices of communicating with spirits, with moral teachings or forms of spirit writing rooted in the historical experiences of a bonded social group" (DeBernardi 2012, 173).

However, we may extend the meaning of 'syncretism' to include DeBernardi's initial definition as referring "to the alliance of warring groups against a third party" (DeBernardi 2012, 173). If we had not known about his ability to communicate with the gods, Witaya would be the leader of a teenage group that typically spends a lot of time in online gaming shops and arcades. They would be very familiar with online games such as *World of Warcraft* and *Counterstrike* (a game I used to play a lot myself and so I know first-hand how violent these games are and how easily one can get obsessed with them). In Witaya's case, he and his friends also played the online game 'Slayers' (http://slayers.onlinegame.com/). These are virtual spaces where one forms an alliance with warring groups against another party.
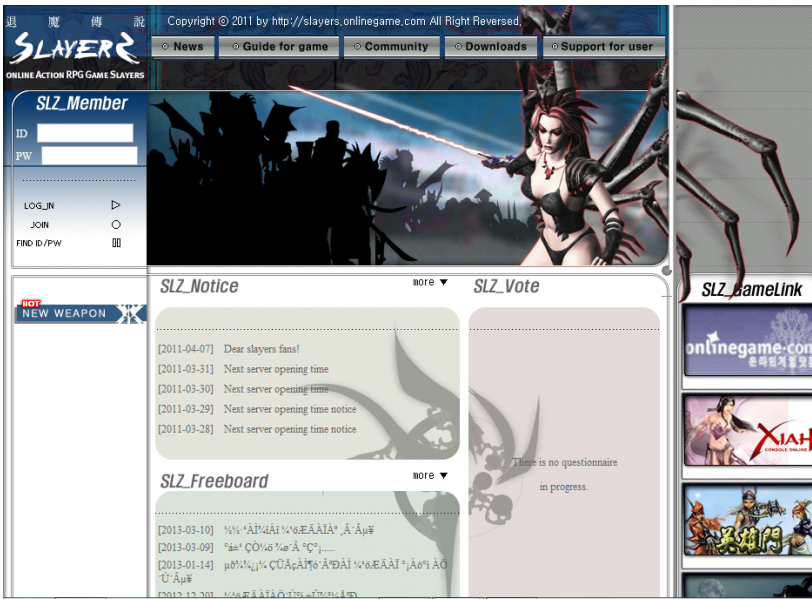

FIG. 44. Screenshot of the now defunct online game, and an image of an avatar or 'slayer'.

Avatars, perhaps echoing Antonin Artaud's Balinese dancers, perform "mechanical eye-rolling, those pouting lips, the use of twitching muscles producing studiously calculated effects, and fluttering wings"[23] (Artaud 1971, 38-39). In one game you could be a terrorist, in the next game, you could switch to being the undead. This production of a [virtual] space that no speech can condense or comprehend and where new languages, text and voice combine and interact, thereby appeals to a time that is no longer that of so-called phonic linearity. Rather, it appeals to a "new notion of space" and "a specific idea of time." This "new notion of space" and "time" must include a new idea of "movement" (Derrida 2006b, 299) These movements include the physical acts of clicking the mouse, the fluid and quick tapping on the keypad, the cross between a physical command to an online action, which is often a multiplication of a simple movement to an elaborate and exaggerated action such as killing, slaying, flying; in short, unnatural gestures and actions.

The fusion of faces, forms and colours may be what Witaya tried to obtain with his own version of 'magical means'. Witaya fused different elements together and created several movements and notions of space and time into a theory so absurd but profoundly playful. I see how the virtual enables the body in ways that are similar to how the spirit enables the body. In this sense, it seems to be a logical progression to simplify the equation and remove the body entirely. The virtual body meets the spirit and all limitations that the body has are removed. The spirit and spirit medium relation during a spirit possession is further blurred when Witaya fused the virtual space of 'Slayers' into his concept of spirit space and produced those 'unnatural' gestures. The virtual play, i.e. the ability to transfer human labour to virtual commands showed him the possibility of existing in a more powerful form and what that

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[23] Here I am quoting Antonin Artaud's description of Balinese dancers (Artaud 1971, 38-39) but it is not to say that virtual avatars are the same as Balinese dancers. It is only to suggest that like the Balinese dancers that were observed in Paris and not in Bali, virtual avatars can become identity markers and tools by which one performs movements and actions within a set of pre-determined parameters that are usually contrary to supposed natural human physical actions. This also suggests how an observer can reimagine forms and shapes (especially when they are taken out of their context) and place them into new contexts.

could consist of in terms of potential godly powers. When associating this potential virtual power alongside the spiritual powers he received when possessed by a god (as also seen in the clips), Witaya could envision a state that fuses both potentials together. All that was left was for him to take his life, 'dissolve' his body and return as a virtual body. In this sense, the body does not diminish; it takes up a different form, perhaps an even more powerful form in his view.

4

End of Play: Notes on Interpretation

I. In *Ritual and Its Consequences*, Adam B. Seligman, Robert P. Weller, Michael J. Puett and Bennett Simon read 'ritual' in terms of the tragic. From their points of view of ritual, the "world is fragmented and fractured" (Seligman et al. 2008, 31). In their reading of ritual action, they traced early Chinese texts[24] on ritual to substantiate their argument:

> [T]he world is inherently fragmented: there is no foundation, there are no overarching sets of guidelines, laws or principles. There are only actions, and it is up to humans to ritualize some of those actions and thereby set up an ordered world … ritual is defined here not as a system of meaning but rather as a set of relations … (Seligman et al. 2008, 34)

They argued that "the interplay of religious practice and everyday life always operates, at least, in the realm of the tragic" and "… the subjunctive world created by ritual is always doomed ultimately to fail—the ordered world of flawless repetition can never replace the broken world of experience … the world always returns to its broken state, constantly requiring repairs of ritual" (Seligman et al. 2008, 30).

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[24] The authors refer mostly to the *Analects* and before that the 'Five Chinese Classics': *Book of Poetry* (诗经), *Book of Documents* (尚书), *Book of Rites* (礼记), *I Ching* or *Book of Changes* (易经) and *Spring and Autumn Annals* (春秋), a historical record complied by Confucius about his native state, Lu (鲁).

Witaya's case can be seen as operating in the realm of the tragic: when ritual plays out to its most extreme and unproductive end—that of death—and destroys the conditions for repetition and for human relations to form; when an individual's rituals cease to "provide an ongoing arena of creativity and tradition, acceptance and obligation" (Seligman et al. 2008, 37).

II. There is, of course, something very tragic in the death and sacrifice of individuals for their religious beliefs. Perhaps tragedy is only felt because we cannot comprehend or recognise the possible efficacy of the deed for the sacred. To rephrase Werner Hamacher: the offering of one's body to achieve a transcendental state of godhood or sagehood is attained only in "purposeless destruction," a practice at once "absolutely religious and absolutely speculative" (Hamacher 1998, 180). The dead person "annuls all finitude and of every economy based upon exchange and opposition" but his or her death is also the only "thing that fulfils the absolute economy of the conclusive unification of the finite and the infinite" (Hamacher 1998, 181). His or her death fulfils the demands of the sacred world. It is purposeless insofar as human economy is lost. Ku Witaya's death also refutes the thesis that ritual constantly repairs—there will not be any more repairs or more labour.

However, I believe that Witaya's case should not be seen as only ritual operating in the tragic realm. The syncretisation of forms teaches us about the cruelty inherent in the operation of mediums. When liminal spaces are formed through theatre, they are a rich environment for tensions and hybridity, fusions and heightened sensibility. In such scenarios, finding meaning cannot rest on reason alone or in traditional categories.

III.

DPP Ang: What were your feelings with regards to the suicide pact?

John: (giggles) Maybe fun. (giggles again)

Mr Yeo: Can you elaborate (on fun)?

John: (Silence)

Mr Yeo: You were OK to it?

John: Yes.

Mr Yeo: You were not afraid?

John: (shakes his head)

Mr Yeo: Can I ask you why?

John: When you believe in something, you'll just do it. (*The New Paper*, September 10, 2009)

In the above quoted exchanged between John and DPP Ang, John was briefly silent when he was asked to elaborate on what he thought about the suicide pact. 'Fun' was his answer, followed by giggling. John's affirmation of the suicide pact was a shock to the court officials and to the many reporters who wrote about the case. Though we have seen how bloggers, friends, schoolmates and even paranormal investigators sought to understand why, I argue that Witaya's headlong rush into death does not have an absolute loss of meaning; at least not to John.

John giggled. What is perhaps laughable, if I reapply Derrida's interpretation of Bataille's laughter, "is the submission to the self-evidence of meaning, to the force of this imperative: that there must be meaning, that nothing must be definitely lost in death…" (Derrida 2006c, 324). Perhaps in order to reserve the possibility not of its meaning but of its non-meaning (Derrida 2006c, 332), John first laughs because there is initially no meaning to be found. I believe it is the force of play, or as he so simply explained, 'Fun', conceived within Witaya's group, thus privy to them, that John and his friends felt most obliged to participate in. We have seen how violent and cruel a spirit medium can be when possessed. This theatre of cruelty draws the participant in with its gestures, actions, speech and writing. The god is born out of the cruel powers of pain and play, death and play, theatre and play. To think of god with man in a spirit possession, alongside online gaming, is always to think of

presence deferred in another realm. After all, to think of spirit is always to experience it as a deferred presence, mediated by someone or something. This deference is, I believe, why the representation of gods and spirits continues and why human participants are drawn to the unknown by the charismatic spirit medium.

IV. But I must take a step back. It is not always about the charismatic religious leader. John was quiet on two occasions. To me, his first moment of silence seems to relate to Bataille's point which I think was revealed to John (by Chan Hong's death in particular):

> In principle, death reveals to Man his natural, animal being, but the revelation never takes place. For once … the human being himself has ceased to exist. For man finally to be revealed to himself he would have to die, but he would have to do so while living – while watching himself cease to be. (Bataille 1955, 32-33 quoted in Derrida 2006c, 325)

Witaya might have succeeded in convincing himself and Chan Hong to die. But I think it was Chan Hong, suspended between life and death for two to three hours, who revealed to his friends Man's 'natural animal being'. John presumably heard Chan Hong's moans at the bottom of the building and would have seen how he looked lying on top of Witaya. Court documents tell us that Chan Hong uttered repeatedly to his friends "don't do it." When Carl and others later confessed that they no longer believe in the truth of Witaya's theory, it is the dying of friends that demonstrated the "encroachment of death upon the living; this completion of the finite being, which alone accomplishes and can alone accomplish his Negativity which kills him …" (Derrida 2006c, 326). Chan Hong's following of Witaya did more than what Witaya could ever do. Though Witaya was the master narrator of the suicide pact, it is the supposed minor player, Chan Hong who is "still attributing a meaning, within discourse, to the absence of meaning" (Derrida 2006c, 331).

I think it is Chan Hong who attributes a meaning in absence of meaning in Witaya's discourse. Chan Hong and Witaya's deaths constitute so irreversible an expenditure, so radical a negativity, that they can no long be determined as negativity in a process or a system (Derrida 2006c, 327). Their deaths are negative insofar as human lives, when fully expended, ended, and with it the human propensity to reason and find meaning in his or her self-consciousness. It can no longer be determined as negativity because despite the absurdity of Witaya's theory, as we have seen, the mechanics of play's fusion is tangible, positive, labour-intensive and life-altering. This difficulty for John and us in general to live with the impression of truly dying "foreshadows the necessity of spectacle, or generally of representation, without the repetition of which we could remain foreign to and ignorant of death …" (Bataille 1955, 38 quoted in Derrida 2006c, 326).

For Witaya, spirituality extends beyond the everyday. He believed that he could return to the human realm to save it from destruction. However, there is something that he neglected to address or rather I have not read anything to suggest that he did. Whether in the virtual realm or conceived as a virtual presence, the salvation he promised is still confined to the virtual world; another world. He did not explain how he could return to 'save the world'. Perhaps his body now lies shut in another form, fused in spirit and in form. Or perhaps he has already fought the war. Nevertheless, when Ku Witaya and Sia Chan Hong took their lives, the possibility of human play ceased with them. At the final moment, Chan Hong rejected Witaya's theory that the connection with the human world was plausible even in a fully virtual form. His "don't do it" expressed the futility of it, as pain and agony coursed through him, and his worry that he would never see his friends and family again. To 'abandon the world' could just mean to Zhuangzi the ability to move between states and forms when he writes, "形精不亏，是谓能移；精而又精，反以相天" (There is no loss in form-and-spirit, this is called movement; when the spirit reaches its pinnacle, it fuses with nature and works

alongside it). In that sense, Zhuangzi is not seeking a literal abandonment of the world, but to coexist and fuse within the natural world. Instead of pursuing this fusion of forms in spirit, body and digital ways, Witaya chose a singular and wholly human means to breach the divide between spirit and human. This would seem to be what Zhuangzi describes as the person who "形不离而生亡者有之矣" (There are still those whose forms remain but are dead), his form remains digitally as reports and memories on blogs, forums and websites but his life is gone.

I hope in my expository, I have perhaps reclaimed the significance of digital play and highlighted its consequences in our everyday realities and its role in the performance of spirits, whether one believes in them or not. Witaya might have gone a step too far in pursuing the possibility of (cyber) life after death and in achieving virtuality. In actualising the possibility, he had 'abandoned' the world in its most literal sense, cutting the route to return to this world.

The individuals that I have represented above tell a very complex and sobering narrative of two youths that die too soon. They all had various ways to cope with the deaths of loved ones and have told their own stories and versions in different contexts and to different people.

When I read Michael Taussig's "Your metaphor. My literality" (Taussig 1997, 4), I felt that this chapter would be about the tension between the two. My literality, the literal accounts of what I discovered in my investigation, meets someone's metaphor where I have to imagine his 'slayers'. That is what I constitute as "productive," and perhaps the only productive discussion I can muster out of a case of what is a loss of two young lives and perhaps souls. It is as Taussig said, "the soul is so important, the indispensable relic that holds open the possibilities for the might have been … And because I feel that I am more known by this than knowing, as though there were an ultimate yet elusive truth in death, inaccessible to people like me for whom death has been supremely sterilized, not to mention

repressed and further mystified …" I too would like to clarify that 'Your metaphor. My literality' could equally be 'His literality, my metaphor.' It is an uneasy tension. This tension arises when I am very mindful of the fact that Witaya's death-work is now retold by me. Taussig comments on Walter Benjamin's "Death-work," and suggests that Benjamin's "*memoire involontaire*" could be "triggered by bodily sensation and bodily circumstance … be externalised in a theatricalised version of itself, as in spirit possession" (Taussig 1997, 79). Indeed, for some people in Singapore, spirit possession is the norm; what is not the norm here is the externalising of involuntary memory (perhaps of some god or spirit that truly possessed Witaya) in a theatricalised and *digital* version. The revelation of Witaya in motion and performing his Death-work is forever concealed but this concealment is persisting in its performance on a highly theatricalised version online.

Therefore, as a final word on my case study, my aim is to reflect on an act of sacrifice to its extreme end. As much as an incident may sound absurd and impossible (and I am still not suggesting that Witaya really rose from the dead and became a slayer), it is as Taussig says: "Could it be that the symbols of the emphatically non-sacred are themselves profoundly sacred?" (Taussig 1997, 188). We may never declare that digital symbols are sacred. But I sense that digital symbols, like Taussig's symbols of the state, when desecrated, the sacred emerges and emerges no longer as symbol but with bodily force. Therefore, we must take them seriously, as many of my colleagues in the field have. Yes, despite my attempts to understand spirituality and the digital alongside, they "remain a secret, cheating the gods [and avatars] of their rightful domain, or maybe conspiring with them" (Taussig 1997, 188).

Chapter 6

Christian Interfaces: Protestant Technology and Pastoral Media

1.   **Introduction**

This chapter takes on a comparative approach in addressing the formation of Protestant

denominations in Singapore. It also draws on the earlier concepts of performativity,

spirituality, technology and mediumship in Taoist practices to offer a fresh perspective on

Protestant Christianity as it is performed in Singapore. Digital technology has increasingly

found its way into the expression and dissemination of the Christian faith. Biblical messages

are often mediated and re-presented on big screens, social media networks and "cell group

chats" on mobile messaging platforms like "Whatsapp." By studying the various digital

media produced by a selection of churches in Singapore, I ask the question: In what ways and

to what extent does digital and new media technology influence and shape how church-goers

experience their respective churches? A quick search on Singapore-based church websites

shows that churches have production support teams to operate media tools and video cameras

during church services.[1] Some have gone further and created media channels (e.g. podcasts

on iTunes) to disseminate videos and audio recordings. The above are just some examples of

new media technology's penetration into Christian experience.

By mapping the varied incorporations of new media into church services and pastoral

care, I aim to demonstrate the negotiation and resistance to having digital technology in

church practices. On one end of the spectrum are the "megachurches" that embrace new

media technology because of the evangelical possibilities it brings; in the middle, are the

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[1] The website of City Harvest Church (http://www.chc.org.sg/), for example, has a "Media" tab that consists of links to various new media channels.

tensions that arise when a smaller church that openly criticises those mega churches for their doctrinal differences also looks into ways of incorporating technology into their worship services. At the other end of the spectrum, are Bible-Presbyterian churches, one of which I attend weekly. There, I observed that any form of digital mediation is functional, such as enlarging words (bible verses and lyrics) on Microsoft PowerPoint slides. "Low" technology or not, the phenomenon of church technology necessitates a reading of the varied attitudes toward technology.

FIG. 45. An image of a camera crew member is used to show how the church's support team is conceived as. Photo: Screenshot of Gospel Light Christian Church's "Support" page (Retrieved from http://www.glcc-online.org/ministries-local/support/ on May 27, 2014).

In *Mediating Piety,* Francis Khek Gee Lim proposes to think of religion and technology as an integrated whole or what he coins as "charismatic technology" (Lim 2009, 5-6). His concept of charismatic technology "refers to a feature of technology that inspires intense, and often unquestioned, confidence and optimism in it as the pre-eminent means for the improvement of our general quality of life" (Lim 2009, 6). Drawing on Max Weber's sociology of domination, Lim considers charisma as "a preeminent force for social change given its inherent dynamism and extraordinary qualities that tend to break free from the

fetters imposed by the rules, regulations and customary practices of either bureaucratic or traditional forms of authority" (Lim 2009, 6). In that sense, Lim compares his "charismatic technology" to Weber's charismatic authority: "the recognition of, and submission to, a leader endowed 'with gifts of the body and spirit, believed to be supernatural, not accessible to everybody'" (Max Weber 1948, 245 quoted in Lim 2009, 6). For Lim, "charismatic technology inspires awe among those under its spell, which is fomented by the capabilities of technology to take us to a supposedly higher, better stage of 'progress'" (Lim 2009, 6). While Lim clarifies that he is not saying that "those under the spell are unaware of the problems that technology itself creates" (Lim 2009, 6), I propose to expand on this clarification and offer a different take on Lim's concept of charisma.

The conflicting doctrines and views of church pastors, who commonly use digital technology to express and disseminate those views, do not singularly create an environment that "inspires awe." One can now find squabbles, attacks and apologetic speeches in the digital environment, where pastors refer to other churches, critiquing or supporting them. The plurality of "Christian authorities" contradict the identity of a unified Christian body. Furthermore, I have observed in the digital environment the formation of an alternative Weberian clergy or what I call technological clergy. A virtual group was formed two years ago when the church leaders of City Harvest Church (CHC) were alleged to have misappropriated church funds to finance a "Crossover" project[2] that entailed a pastor pursuing an overseas music career. Since those allegations emerged and the church leaders are still undergoing legal proceedings, an online Facebook page called "CHC Confessions" was set up. "Confessions" or posts by current and former church-goers of CHC, as well as anonymous Christians and non-Christians post comments about the church leaders and offer

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[2] See "Crossover Project" at City Harvest Church 'Crossover' website [http://www.chc.org.sg/main/crossover/].

their personal experiences in the church. The confessions, I argue, counter-perform the "inspiring awe" of charismatic technology, and subvert the charismatic authority that is often aligned with technological advancements. Lim points out that technology "comes into constant tension" with "religious truths" that "tend to be relatively stable and are usually sustained by regimes of power (e.g. the church, charismatic authoritative figures, the states, etc.)" (Lim 2009, 9). The example of "CHC Confessions" demonstrates Lim's point in a modified way. Technology alone cannot create those tensions. Instead, it provides a platform by which church members or Christians from other denominations come to question authoritative figures.

The two examples present a problematic generalisation of Protestant churches in Singapore that is implied by Francis Lim when he writes that "religious truths tend to be relatively stable" (Lim 2009, 9). More explicitly, Mathew Mathews states that "the nature of Christianity in Singapore, the Protestant segment is best described as conservative" (Mathews 2009, 188). Further, he summarises the common interpretation of the Protestant form of Christianity (he cites J. Bartkowski, R. D. Woodberry and C. S. Smith) as priding "itself on its strong commitment to preserve fundamental tenets of faith, particularly a belief in the literal interpretation of Scripture" (Mathews 2009, 188). While in general this is true, Protestant denominations often differ in their "literal interpretation" of many aspects of worship, doctrine and standards. In this chapter, I will show the example of the "Prosperity and Wealth Gospel" promoted by churches such as CHC and New Creation Church (NCC), which are often termed as "megachurches" in Singapore.[3] I will then compare those churches

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[3] See "Singapore's megachurches move to export lucrative religion" by Laura Philomin at Reuters.com (U.S. Edition), 6 March 6, 2014 retrieved from http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/06/us-singapore-megachurches-idUSBREA2509Y20140306 on May 23, 2014. Also see "Who are Singapore's megachurch members?" by Leonard Lim, The Straits Times, Jan 16, 2013, Retrieved from http://news.asiaone.com/News/Latest+News/Singapore/Story/A1Story20130114-395521.html on 23rd May 2014.

with another Protestant church, Gospel Light Christian Church, which fiercely opposes this interpretation of the gospel.

The difference in interpretations has direct implication on how "new media technology," as Robin Chee Ming Feng and James Chen call it, function "interactively" for "potential devotees" (Chee and Chen 2009, 177). Chee and Chen interviewed Christians or the "religious shopper" who through "new media tools" decides on Christianity as their religion. While it is true that "new media tools" provide interactive means of finding out what Christianity is like, it is by no means a homogenous picture that the Internet paints. "To shop," using Chee and Chen's term, suggests a market logic which megachurches would subscribe to. They also allude to a form of "religious contestation" in new media platforms, which they describe as seemingly depicting "an on-going and continual attempt by believers of dominant religions to confirm their status quo and domineering presence in all forms of media in response to the rising threat of non-mainstream and new religions in the cyberspace" (Chee and Chen 2009, 175). Further, Joy Tong argues that it is "mainly through this McDonaldization that megachurches grow to their current size in a very short period of time and acquire their unique identities and influences in societies" (Tong 2008, 186-187). Referring to Ritzer's theory on the "McDonaldization of society," Tong argues that the notion of McDonaldization provides a compatible model to explain how megachurches rationalise their evangelical processes within a modern consumer society. These megachurches have well-designed websites with interactive tools that provide audio podcasts, videos, online shops to purchase sermon recordings and books, etc.

Nevertheless, Tong notes the limitations of Ritzer's theory, which overemphasises the homogeneity in the production and consumption of Christian "products" and may fail to take into account the local context. I concur that there is much to examine in terms of the cultural dimension of megachurches and how they appeal to local believers. However, megachurches'

growth in Singapore is not only due to a "marketing and branding mentality … adopted from secular corporations" (Tong 2008, 188), but also, I would add, to the particular interpretation of the Bible and the performance of the spiritual in Singapore.

I derive my next observation based on the last: new media technology inevitably reperforms scriptural text and spiritual teachings. On the one hand, it may organise and group the scriptural text and provide interactive means of accessing it (such as being able to search exact words and verses of the Bible). On the other hand, other forms of presentations such as video and audio clips provide charismatic leaders a way to present their public persona as representative of their church bodies. In short, the "literal interpretation" of the Bible is no longer "literal" but is re-interpreted online, mediated and divided into more forms, formats and possibilities of reception and reinterpretation.

1.1 How Charismatic Technology re-performs the Biblical Word

Christianity in Singapore has developed and adopted new media technology to evangelise, propagate, and preach its teachings. From Microsoft Powerpoint slides to display the lyrics of hymns or Biblical verses on a projection screen when a pastor speaks before a congregation to the expensive incorporation of video cameras, live video feed and sound surround system in an auditorium designed to hold concerts, the Bible can be modified by these variegated presentational forms. In general there are three areas to locate the re-performances of the Bible in Singapore:

a. Through live performances such as Christmas shows, Easter performances and concerts that coincide with public holidays

b. Through recordings of these live performances, sermons, teachings and religious speeches, which are then digitalised and broadcasted on podcasts and online streaming video channels

c. Through online discussion boards, Twitter and Facebook posts

In the first presentational form, I shall discuss my work at a Protestant church, Gospel Light Christian Church (GLCC), and show how my intervention has in some ways caused the church members to rethink their interpretation of the Bible. At the same time, I had to compromise my impulses that come from my theatre training and my own religious belief as a Bible-Presbyterian. As a result, there were limits to performing the Bible and when the Gospel was recontextualised as a Christmas show, there were cuts and edits to the Biblical message, emphasising a particular interpretation of the Gospel.

Acts of interpretation become a daily activity for Christians as they face the readily available online resources, the weekly sermons and prayer meetings. At the heart of those resources and activities is the foregrounding of a church pastor or leader as the face of the church. At the end of the Christmas show that I directed, the pastor delivered a Christmas message and introduced himself as the church leader. When Singaporeans talk about New Creation Church (NCC), it is almost synonymous with the senior Pastor Joseph Prince, just as Pastor Khong Hee is associated with City Harvest Church. The two have comprehensive online presences. The question remains whether one can truly attribute authority to an individual, a charismatic pastor. It also opens up the whole question of how an individual actively represents him or herself online. This leads me to closely examine the pastoral techniques and personal charisma of pastors and to what extent they, as messengers of God, replace the face of the invisible God.

The third area of discussion reiterates the second. I choose to present the situation of Protestant churches in Singapore as more fragmented. I do not accept the homogenous grouping of churches together because there are fundamental differences. Here I look at the discourses of Derrida to illuminate the subjectivity of religious truth and the fallacy of a single unified church. Individuals pose and post, as themselves and as pseudonyms and that

presents a very different picture of Protestantism in Singapore from Mathew Mathews's "conservative" Protestanism.

In summary, this chapter will cover a mixture of voices and discourses but most of all, it will situate the conflicts and tensions at points where they are mediated and manifested as live and online performances. Despite the difference in media, contemporary Christmas movements reiterate a long history of Christian controversies, conflicts, confessions and conflicting experience.

2

Performing the Body of Christ

In 2013, the church leaders of Gospel Light Christian Church (GLCC) asked me to direct a Christmas show and make it more "professional" and "experiential." My brother is a Sunday school teacher at GLCC and had told his pastor that I could help them in that aspect because of my theatre background. GLCC's church leadership was fully aware of the pre-existing Christmas shows put up by "megachurches" such as New Creation Church and Faith Community Baptist Church—Protestant churches that average at least two thousand total attendees in their weekend services (Thumma and Travis 2007, xviii). Their Christmas shows are known to be huge concert-like events, requiring large performance venues and elaborate set and lighting designs. GLCC wanted to have its own Christmas show, which three different language congregations (English, Mandarin and Tagalog) could attend, without the elaborate concert aesthetics associated with the megachurches as it understood the efficacy of such shows and yet wanted to maintain their doctrinal beliefs that prohibit secular or flashy aesthetics.

Such outreach gestures of GLCC and the megachurches would fall under what Jayeel S. Cornelio calls "the new face of global Protestant evangelism" (Cornelio 2009, 184) as the agenda for their Christmas shows is to increase their church membership. There are three components to this "new face." First, Cornelio proposes that "the Internet is facilitating the replication of spiritual experience" and "the rise of Christianity on cyberspace…complements Christianity on the ground." For him, the "new face of global evangelism entails a systematic and coherent approach to gospel-sharing and community-formation," which results in "neither an illusion of community nor an alienating environment" (Cornelio 2009, 185). Second, he argues that the process of global evangelism is not homogenized despite the global reach of the Internet. Lastly, he predicts that "contemporary Christianity may foresee a globalised process that encourages membership and spiritual authority in unique ways, and in so doing, further enlarges the community of its believers" (Cornelio 2009, 185).

Cornelio's arguments suggest that online evangelism facilitates the expansion of a Christian community but I also observe a segregation of the Christian community. Ongoing conflicts among churches and denominations when interpreting evangelical principles from the Bible highlight the disparity between Protestant communities. In fact, the online environment intensifies those disparities. Online sources must also consist of debates, conflicts, tensions and both dominant and non-dominant discourses of Christianity.

Hence, this chapter seeks to contribute to the discussion on contemporary Christianity within the Singapore context by examining Christianity "on the ground" (GLCC's Christmas show) along with online evangelism in Singapore. In doing so, I also aim to explore whether Christianity on the two mediums of theatre and the digital truly "complement each other" as Cornelio believes. In addition, GLCC's case demonstrates what many scholars observe as the reactive sentiment of "if we can't beat them, join them" of religious leaders and institutions, where instead of "resisting the influence and impact of new media in re-interpretation or

potentially mis-representing their religion, they have utilised this form of media as a tool instead to re-assert their influence and to pronounce their desired conception of their faith" (Chee and Chen 2009, 165).

I will first discuss the processes that GLCC adopts "on the ground" by looking at how church volunteers of the Christmas production responded to my direction, how I negotiated my positions as a Christian and a theatre director and how GLCC's doctrines shaped the production. Next, I will elucidate the importance of what Bagdikian calls the emergence of a "multiplicity of sources" of media (Bagdikian 1997, 47), of which both theatre and new media platforms constitute this "new face" of evangelism. There is a need to comprehend the relationship between theatre and new media in Christianity given that they are now expressed alongside each other in evangelical work.

However, these discursive considerations did not inform my purpose to join the work of GLCC and were only formed on hindsight. I agreed to help as I felt compelled to do so as a fellow Christian and wished to do my part to evangelise. Despite being from a different church, I thought I might benefit from expanding my fellowship[4] circle. However, I quickly learnt that my and GLCC's expectations differed regarding the purpose of the Christmas show. While I understood that what constitutes evangelism differs from church to church and denomination to denomination, I was not aware that the differences could cause potential tensions until my experience with GLCC. This led me to take stock of and account for my experience and understand evangelism in Singapore in new and illuminating ways.

Tensions arose when certain theatre conventions were considered too elaborate or non-doctrinal by GLCC. For example, GLCC was resistant to having popular music and dance on stage. Despite pre-existing theatrical prejudices such as no applauding or dancing during a

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[4] And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near (*English Standard Version*, Hebrews 10:24-25).

service, GLCC church leaders recognised how performance provides an effective means of communicating the gospel message to the public, and a useful way to maintain, renew and expand their community. In order to fully utilise theatrical performances and circumvent their tricky nature, artistic choices were made and couched in spiritual terms, often after an open prayer, and had to conform to the church's written constitution.

The tensions I experienced during my time at the church can be expressed as the tension between the bible's call to "go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature" (*KJV*, Mark 16:15) and what was considered proper and holy to the church. To what extent and how should a church appeal to the world in order to convert more believers? When the bible writes of worship as "speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord" (Ephesians 5:19), the question remains what those songs are and how they should sound. If so, how should worship conform to Romans 12:1-2, "I appear to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not conform to this world…" (*ESV*)? The interpretative preferences of a church community with regard to spiritual worship can often be revealed by the verses that they emphasise through the performance of their evangelical practices. The experience of "global evangelism" must take into consideration the specificities of a church and the possible conflicts with other churches and Christians, thereby complicating our understanding of evangelism carried out by different communities of Singaporean Christians.

2.1 Tongues: Amen and Words

The very act of saying "Amen" affirms a prayer. When I attended my first production meeting at the GLCC church, Pastor Jason Lim opened with a prayer. He thanked God that I had volunteered to help them with the year-end Christmas production and ended the prayer

with an "Amen," thus affirming my role as the Director of the production, as well as verbally announcing the hope that I would be able to turn it into a success.

To GLCC, the success of the Christmas production would be determined by how well it could deliver the gospel message and convert new believers to Christianity. The gospel is defined as the belief that God sent his only son, Jesus Christ, to the world and that whosoever believes in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life (*KJV*, John 3:16).

The key feature of directing a Christian production as compared to other theatrical productions I have worked in is that every rehearsal would begin and end with a corporate prayer. That was the recurring reminder for the volunteers that they were working for Christ by being in this project. Pastor Lim once led the prayer and he reminded everyone involved that the production was evangelical as well as to encourage Christian fellowship. It was a time when they could reaffirm their commitment to Christ and do their part to advance Christendom. This particular prayer, performatively speaking, framed the production as a Christian enterprise and legitimised the endeavour in two ways: to increase membership and to consolidate membership. The frame they had established made working with them easy as they saw me as a fellow Christian and were thankful for my help. Nevertheless, I was conscious that I remained outside of their church membership, and while my ideas were heard, they had reservations and restrictions about the extent to which theatre should merge with Christian messages.

After the prayer, the church leadership began to discuss the practicalities of producing the Christmas production. Basic questions arose:

What constitutes a Christmas production? What will it look like? Where will we stage it? Who will we invite?

It would eventually take a month of prayers and meetings before some of the questions were answered. Without an in-house production team, GLCC took a long time to find

volunteers to fill the various roles needed to put up a performance. Being independent and

non-denominational, GLCC explicitly states in its constitution Article 5 that:

> 5.2 While all true believers are spiritually one in Christ, being united with one another, and with Christ,
> the joining together of all and sundry Christians and others in ecumenical union is unbiblical and
> abominable in the sight of God.[5]

While not explicit in collaterals and rhetoric associated with the Christmas show,

GLCC's Constitution informs the production of the show. Nevertheless the show unwittingly

contradicts Article 5.2, which strictly calls "true believers" to separate themselves from all

"sundry Christians." Without clarification, it is hard to understand how it does not contradict

the verse Mark 16:15 mentioned earlier. What is the world? How does the church body

present herself to the world? If according to GLCC's constitution there should be a biblical

separation from all other denominations and Christians that do not conform to the

interpretation of the Bible according to GLCC, why is there an open invitation for a

Christmas show?

2.2 Tongues: Squabble

It is not uncommon that factions break away from existing denominations and form

smaller groups or churches. The Bible-Presbyterian (BP) denomination in Singapore was the

result of a breakaway from the Presbyterians, led by Reverend Timothy Tow and Elder Quek

Kiok Chiang (Chia N.d.) in 1955. But Reverend Timothy Tow himself traced it earlier to

1950, when he led the first English congregation and Life BP Church and makes no mention

of BP as a direct opposition to the Presbyterian denomination. Instead, he writes that Life BP

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[5] The full constitution can be found at
https://docs.google.com/open?id=0B1fcGkfRS326UTAtYmViNGpRQnlYUkF0aDB4QVVxUQ

Church associated itself with what he calls "the 20th Century Reformation" led by Dr Carl McIntire, president of Seminary Board of the Faith Theological Seminary, USA. The American Bible-Presbyterians sought to separate from the "Ecumenical Movement under liberal and modernist leadership," and the World Council of Churches that was formed in 1948. Both are perceived as "liberal" and for the BP leaders, such as Rev. Tow, "neo-evangelical" movements that go into dialogue with or accept other religions are considered to be "deadly" (Tow 1995, 17). Article 6.9 of the Constitution of Life Bible-Presbyterian Church in Singapore states the separatist position clearly:

> We are opposed to all efforts to obscure or wipe out the clear line of separation between these absolutes: truth and error, light and darkness. (See Jer 5:20; 2 Cor 6:14-18) We refer to such efforts by New Evangelicals, Charismatic Christians, promoters of ecumenical cooperative evangelism and of the social gospel, and all churches and other movements and organisations that are aligned with or sympathetic to the Ecumenical Movement. ("Doctrinal Position," retrieved from http://lifebpc.com/index.php/about-us/doctrinal-position on May 28, 2014)

The reason why I mention the Bible-Presbyterian movement in Singapore is because of the recurring motifs of separation and conflict that perpetuates the Christian scene and the BP movement is one of many such cases of separations. Dr Carl McIntire, of the American movement mentioned earlier, evoked the Lutheran spirit when he wrote his own ninety-five theses to protest against the Ecumenical Movement. What has further transpired recently in 2010 for the BP churches in Singapore is the public controversy between Far Eastern Bible College (FEBC) and Life Bible-Presbyterian Church. The Church sought a declaratory relief to determine that FEBC was a different entity from the Church and FEBC had to vacate the shared premises.[6] This resulted in a court case but the quarrel took on theological

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[6] A record of the court case can be found at the following link: http://www.singaporelaw.sg/sglaw/laws-of-singapore/case-law/free-law/court-of-appeal-judgments/14604-khoo-jeffrey-and-others-v-life-bible-presbyterian-church-and-others-2011-sgca-18.

underpinnings when leaders from both sides within the denomination took turns to criticise

their respective doctrines.[7] This incident, among others in Singapore, tells us of the

problematic culture of Protestant Christianity in Singapore. The differing interpretations of

the Bible often become the key catalyst for controversies to manifest and new churches to

form.[8] This can be echoed by my own experience directing a church in a Christmas show.

2.3   Body: Church

My challenge was to find a way to present the different aspects of the Gospel despite

the various limitations presented—venue, time, personnel (actors and production team), and

doctrine. Furthermore, GLCC had decided prior to my involvement to focus on the nativity

narrative, thus omitting the Calvary narrative and the resurrection of Christ.

As part of the target audience were children, church leaders believed that the show

should be more family-oriented. Thus, any physical representation of the crucifixion and

torture of Christ had to be excluded. The playwright was briefed by the pastor to create a

simple story of the birth of Christ, summarising the key scenes and placing them in a

sequence (though the scenes are told separately in the four different books, Matthew, Mark,

Luke and John). This included the epiphany of the angels before the three shepherds, the visit

of the three wise men, and the appearance of the star and the blessed infant in the manger.

Given that the show was only thirty minutes long, with the other half of the production being

a sermon that Pastor Lim had prepared, it was impossible to present the full gospel.

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[7] In one particular scene, Rev. Jeffery Khoo of FEBC responded to an article written by Rev. Charles Seet of Life BP Church that was later published in the Life Bible-Presbyterian Church (BPC) Weekly of January 27, 2008. Rev. Khoo questions the allegations that Rev. Seet wrote in his article, such as how Rev. Khoo was practising "selective quotation". In response, Rev. Khoo rebukes Rev. Seet and alleges that Rev. Seet would have done the same if he were guilty of it. (Accessed May 28, 2014. http://www.febc.edu.sg/VPP77.htm.)

[8] Another controversial issue raised within the BP community is the subject on the use of the King James Bible. Some proponents have insisted on the authority of the KJV as opposed to other versions of the English translation of the Bible. Reverend Tan Eng Boo writes about this in-fighting in his weekly Church bulletin. See http://www.gracebpc.org.sg/weekly/2009/Jan%202009/1101/gwc.htm

Having decided on the perimeters of the production, the committee proceeded to choose a title for the production. The marketing and publicity personnel wanted this to be decided on soon as this would help them to produce the collaterals early. One of the members suggested "Born to Die" but Pastor Lim immediately chipped in that it would be more suitable to change it to "Born to Save." He explained that the title would emphasize salvation over death and Christ's triumph over death and sin, and this would be his central message in his Christmas sermon. This soon became the main trope of the production and the script was conceived with this emphasis in mind. While I agreed with Pastor Lim's explanation, I also felt that the death of Christ was equally important and suggested that the production should still include the crucifixion or at least allude to that moment. However, it was decided that the focus would largely be on the birth of Jesus Christ.

This posed a problem for the playwright, who had no playwriting experience, as she had to find a story structure that accommodated the shifts in time and events. Eventually, after a consultation with the pastor, she decided to have two fictional characters recall the time of Christ's birth after witnessing Jesus taken away by soldiers. She decided not to depict Christ dying on the cross as well.

2.4   Bodies: Christ

Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me …

This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me (1 Corinthians 11:24-25).

For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12).

The disappearance of the bloody and tortured icon of Christ with a crown of thorns and nails from the Protestant church is well documented. David M. Gwynn argues that the

seventh ecumenical council in Nicaea in A.D. 787 was an extension of the first ecumenical

council meeting in A.D. 325 that gathered to condemn Arianism. Gwynn provides an

informative account of the "Iconoclast Controversy" and the long tradition of polarised sides:

the Iconophiles against the Iconoclasts (Gwynn 2007, 225-226). The controversy of whether

images of God or Christ were considered as dishonouring God would eventually replay itself

during the Reformation period: "While some Protestants cast down the "idols" of Rome,

Luther cast out the image breakers from Wittenberg. The redefinition of the sacred, then,

became the watershed that separated not only Protestant from Catholic, but Lutheran from

Reformed as well" (Eire 1986, 2).

The exclusion of the image of a dying Christ by GLCC falls in line with the tradition of

the Iconoclasts. The Christmas production committee explicitly decided that there would be

no depiction of Christ's crucified body. Till now, the sacred image of Christ is still being

redefined; Protestants may have removed the gory image of the mutilated Christ from the

corridors and altars of their churches but the image is always evoked during Holy

Communion, Christmas and Easter productions. The key question is what images can be

evoked and how they are to be represented.

2.5   Bodies: Christians

GLCC also reinforced and distanced themselves from Charismatic practices. This

indirectly informed the direction of the Christmas show. Dr Paul Choo[9], founding pastor of

GLCC, was known for rejecting the "prosperity gospel" of City Harvest Church online. In a

recorded YouTube video of Choo's message, he associates the Prosperity message to an

investment scheme:

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[9] A more detailed profile of Dr Paul Choo can be found at http://www.goducate.org/paul-choo-the-visionary.html

So many people are brainwashed. Many of them. … "Why don't they leave the church? Why more go? You mean everybody's brainwashed? Everybody's like that?" Well let me tell you, many will not leave because this is the best scheme they've ever seen in their life… You know you put money in a bank now, how many percentage do you get? Less than one percent right? Quarter percent I heard. Someone told me. … You put money in this scheme, prosperity gospel scheme, backed by God you know. Not backed by bank. Not banked by US government. Not banked by Swiss government or Singapore. It's backed by God you know. You know how powerful God is? If you can't trust God, who can you trust? So here we say, "How can they leave a scheme like this? It's so attractive!" Quarter percent? This one gives you minimum three thousand percent. Thirty four. … Hundredfold? Ten thousand percent. Why do you want to take money out and put it in the bank? "Are you stupid or what? This is backed by God! Endorsed by men of God!"[10]

Choo's tone of anger and scorn for the Prosperity message is clear. Although his criticism of the teachings of City Harvest Church is rather extreme and dramatic, it is an indication of the doctrinal beliefs and attitudes GLCC leadership and their members hold towards churches that teach doctrines like the Prosperity message.

GLCC members also seek to distance themselves from the worship practices of those churches. During GLCC's church services, the congregation is limited to the following: standing, sitting and singing hymns. In contrast, a church service at City Harvest Church is often openly expressive—members would stand, clap, raise their palms into the air, close their eyes and sing praises to God.

In an article by Reuters, Choo is quoted saying, "The prosperity gospel is a very big movement, a very visible movement, that doesn't represent what I believe to be biblical

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[10] A transcription is provided by a post on c3churchwatch.com on 7 May 2013. I initially referred to that website to view the video. Accessed May 28, 2014 from http://c3churchwatch.com/2013/05/07/dr-paul-choo-warns-people-against-kong-hees-ministry-this-is-not-christianity-this-is-not-the-gospel-this-is-a-scam/. The video is also available at GLCC's website at http://www.glcc-online.org/2012/08/prosperity-gospel/ and was recorded in 2012. The video is also available on YouTube at the web address: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=irTMfRJlbPE

Christianity." Deliberately framed, Choo's quotes parenthesise the following statistics

provided by Reuters:

> City Harvest raised S$22.7 million with its Building Fund Campaign, helping it to buy a stake of 39.2
>
> percent in the venue for its services, Suntec Singapore Convention and Exhibition Centre, for S$97.8
>
> million in 2012.
>
> New Creation's Miracle Seed event raised S$21 million in one day, contributing to the S$348 million it
>
> spent on building the 5,000-seat Star Performing Arts Centre, one of four venues where it holds services.
>
> "I don't think there's been any era as materialistic as this one," said Choo of Gospel Light Christian
>
> Church. "If it promises wealth, it will have some ready audience." (Retrieved from Reuters on May 28,
>
> 2014, http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/03/06/uk-singapore-megachurches-
>
> idUKBREA250HT20140306)

New Creation Church (NCC) is also known to preach a similar doctrine, which forms

the central theme of a book called *Destined to Reign*, written and published by their senior

pastor, Joseph Prince. Ironically, the venue of GLCC's Christmas production was owned by

New Creation Church's subsidiary company, Rock Productions. The executive who signed

the agreement with GLCC was unaware of the controversy that Choo had raised in his

criticism of NCC's prosperity gospel. When it was finally brought to the company's

attention, the agreement had been signed and they had to fulfil their contractual obligation. I

heard that Rock Productions was initially reluctant to continue with the agreement but the

staff members decided to be professional in their approach and the agreement was honoured.

I believe such public incidents exemplify GLCC's prevailing attitude towards those

churches, and I was fully aware that I had to distance the style of their Christmas production

from those often put up by the two churches. For example, during City Harvest Church's

Easter service in 2014, an actor played the crucified Christ.[11] As mentioned, GLCC explicitly stated that they did not want such an image for their own shows and services. Emphasis was placed on the message of "Born to save" and getting the Pastor to explain the meaning of the performance after.

While GLCC and charismatic churches like City Harvest and New Creation have disparate attitudes towards church performances and how God's images should be represented on stage, they both see the necessity of an image to represent Jesus Christ—whether it is a human person, a cross, a star or a plastic doll (the production team could only provide me with a doll to represent the infant Jesus).

This replacement of Christ with an image or object could be understood as making an image come into presence and as one out of a whole set of given identities of Christ. In *The Ground of the Image*, Jean-Luc Nancy writes that an image is:

> …what imagines itself and how it imagines itself…Or again: an image is (the fact) that and the way in which something forms itself in and as one. An image is the making-one, the making-itself-one of something… it is the possibility that anything at all, including something multiple or fluid, may come to presence; which is to say that, as some thing or event, it may bring itself out of the confused and incessantly dissolved dispersion of sensible givens in order to give itself to be seen. (Nancy 2005, 84)

Any effort to represent the Gospel on stage already invites a making of images that may represent Jesus Christ to an audience; one image out of many others. But Nancy goes further:

> In the ground of the image there is the imagination, and in the ground of the imagination there is the other, the look of the other, that is, the look onto the other and the other as look—which also opens, consequently, as an other of the look, a fore-seeing non-look. (Nancy 2005, 97)

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[11] The images can be found in the media gallery of CHC website at <http://www.chc.org.sg/#!140418-20-easter-svcs/>. In one particular image, a Chinese Jesus is coated in fake blood, tied to a prop cross and in the background, a projection of lightning flashing across the stage is shown. Elsewhere, more Chinese-Roman soldiers stand on guard.

The same could be said of the dead infant and the sacrificial lamb as "Dead and consequently respectively, having been: it will always already have begun to image (itself)." The Gospel secret then would be that the "imagination remains unimaginable" (Nancy 2005, 97) and I go as far as to say that because God remains invisible, an image of God remains unimaginable and wholly other. As Derrida puts it (citing Kierkegaard), "the secret truth of faith as absolute responsibility and as absolute passion … is a passion that, sworn to secrecy, cannot be transmitted from generation to generation." In this sense, "it has no history" (Derrida 2008, 80).

However, Nancy reminds us that Christianity does present itself "historically and doctrinally as a composition" (Nancy 2008a, 37). It may be more appropriate to describe Christianity as a history of "complex elaboration" that starts "with a provenance in and a detachment from Judaism, but also in and from Greek or Greco-Roman philosophy, as much in ontology as in politics" (Nancy 2008a, 37). For Nancy, the dogmatic Christian construction is that of a way of thinking whose centre is "the word of God made flesh." The heart of this dogma is declared a mystery (as opposed to myth)—that "brings light to that mind and about it" (Nancy 2008a, 37-38). Nancy, along with Derrida and Kierkegaard, is right to say that "Christianity is less a body of doctrine than a subject in relationship to itself in the midst of a search for self, within a disquietude, an awaiting or a desire for its proper identity" (Nancy 2008a, 38). Because this 'proper identity' or new body (1 Corinthians 15:51-52) is fore-seen in the second coming of Christ, everything prior to its formation is a process, a search and an awaiting without a clear indication when it will happen.

Nancy states that "Christianity (and through this prism, monotheism) has been engaged from its beginning in a perpetual process (i.e., a process and a litigation) of self-rectification and self-surpassing, most often in the form of self-retrospection in view of a return to a purer origin" (Nancy 2008a, 39). However, a "purer origin" is estranged with variegated

interpretations of this origin. Christianity, as it were, has a history of divisions and detachments, perpetually imagining the wholly Other, even as it comes into relation with the Other and gets entangled with others, such as within a church body. Through performance, this history is somewhat replayed, and the interpretative preferences of a particular church are laid bare for its members to reaffirm their faith. When Nancy evokes the stage convention of "entering and exiting" (Nancy 2005, 98), could this not also be said of performance and not just the making of an image? Or rather, a church performance perform images and the imagining of images. Nancy affirms that the image performs by appearing and disappearing: "Entering and exiting, that is what makes the image: appearing and disappearing" (Nancy 2005, 98). In that sense, the making of images is "not first representing, but first being or making "a time, *une fois*," a first and last time, the time [*temps*] of making or taking an image, the time of time itself, which opens the eyes" (Nancy 2005, 98); the making of images assumes the subject in proximity to others, which in my reading is a theatrical structure, the perpetual *entering and exiting* of church members in proximity making images.

This ties in with Nancy's larger project to deconstruct Christianity, or rather, to hypostasise that Christianity is deconstructive:

> Christianity is in itself essentially the movement of its own distension, because it represents the constituting of a subject in the process of opening and distending itself. Obviously, then, we must say that deconstruction, which is only possible by means of that distension, is itself Christian. It is Christian because Christianity is, originally, deconstructive, because it relates immediately to its own origin as to a slack [*jeu*], an interval, some play, an opening in the origin. (*Nancy 2008a,* 149)

But Nancy does not stop there and writes that "Christianity is the exact opposite— denial, foreclosure of a deconstruction and of its own deconstruction—precisely because it puts in place of the structure of origin, of any and all origin, something else: the proclamation

of its end" (Nancy 2008a, 149). The making of images in the context of the church includes also this dimension: the perpetual proclamation of its end by the bodies of Christ.

2.6 Bodies: Church Members

The rehearsal time, or the time of making images, illustrates how church members when placed together to produce the image of the infant Christ, is at the heart of the perpetual process of proclaiming Christianity. The Christmas show production, in particular, puts in place an image of the origin (Christ's birth) and proclaims its truth. Simultaneously it also relates immediately to the play, the production of images, and the mediation of the church's interpretation of the Gospel.

During the rehearsal process, I conducted a series of exercises for church members who had volunteered for the Christmas show. My intention was to help them become comfortable with confessing and relating their own experiences as Christians, as such sharing sessions may contribute to the making of the show.

In one "hot-seat" exercise, I asked them to think about how "Christ has personally touched your lives;" or "think of your own salvation process and the moment when you accepted Christ as your Lord and Saviour." They then had to assume the role of the main character of the Christmas show and allude to their own personal experiences to form a story for the characters.

Those motivations helped the rehearsal to move into a more personal space, and were especially useful for a scene that was adapted from the various short stories in the Gospels—the leper (Matthew 8, the Samaritan woman (John 4), the man healed at the Pool of Bethesda (John 5), the tax collector Luke (Luke 19) and the children who came to Jesus (Matthew 19:14 and Luke 18:16). These biblical characters started to come to life as backstories were given to them and I was open to them mixing what little we know of the characters from the

Bible with their own personal touches. For example, the actor who played the man healed at the Pool of Bethesda was a trained dancer who had quit his job as a dancer to work at GLCC full time. For him, to "take up the bed and walk" (John 5:8) was more nuanced. The decision to go into full time ministry work meant that he had to stop dancing professionally. The action that symbolised him walking with Jesus would paradoxically limit his dancing career, and also represented him walking away from his past.

Of course, not all of them were open to this exercise and some relied heavily on existing information provided by the Bible to inform their acting. For instance, the actor playing the Samaritan woman had drama experience in school. While this helped her to speak her lines eloquently, it also made her performance quite actorly as she was relying on her perceived imagination of the Samaritan woman. I tried to get her to draw on her own experience more as a Christian convert who may sometimes feel unworthy of God's grace, as I felt that this would make her performance more authentic.

I acknowledge that this particular preparatory device had more to do with my preference to tap into everyone's personal experience. I believed that it would help them to naturalise their acting so that they would not superficially sketch out those biblical characters, whose appearances in the bible have performative nuances and messages. There is always a fair amount of interplay between imagination and testimony. The volunteers would have to imagine the character as they understood them whilst bringing in their own personal experience with Jesus to inform their acting.

2.7   Ears: Listening

As rehearsals continued, I requested for songs to be used for the scenes as the transitions were not clearly written in the script. No one had initiated the idea to have songs in the performance and I personally requested to include them to create the "experiential"

mood that Pastor Lim requested. Lim often made references to Universal Studios Singapore as the sort of effect he wanted for the show. I explained that in order to replicate that experience, he would need a combination of visual and aural elements. A GLCC member, who runs an events company, was recruited to provide the technical support for those requirements. The member agreed that if GLCC wanted such an 'experience', they would have to invest in a set, props, and costumes. They would also have to hire a performance venue that would be able to provide good lighting and sound systems.

Eventually, a church member was given the role of Music Director and she had to select songs to insert into the script. I left the choices to her as GLCC was very specific about the songs they allowed. They were afraid that the messages in the songs might give a wrong impression to the audience. For instance, they refused to use conventional Christmas Santa Claus songs as they felt that there would be too much of a reference to the commercial and paganistic Christmas celebrations that are a common feature in Singapore's shopping malls in December. Dance and rock music are also frown upon. Eventually, they decided to use familiar Christian carols such as "Joy to the World" and "Silent Night," which are ironically popular carols used by the shopping malls too. They also decided to have a video projection. One of the reasons was that they wanted the actors' photographs and their role names projected onscreen at the start the show as they were afraid that audience members would not know which actor was playing which character.

Those creative choices made by the church reveal the tension that arise when pre-empting the audience's reception. The church leaders are afraid the audience will undergo a suspension of disbelief entirely and forget that this was simply a performance. They deliberately want to remind the audience in a kind of Brechtian way of the stark contrast between performance and sermon, and the former is just a frame to introduce them to the latter.

By then the Christmas show was called a "presentation." It would only take up thirty minutes, half the time of a usual Christmas production, followed by twenty-five minutes of Pastor Lim's message. This structure emphasised the significance of the spoken sermon; the "presentation" was considered the prelude to the sermon. This had significant implications on my position as Director because Lim had conceived his message before the production was conceived, and the "presentation" would be but an entry point to his message. He wanted to focus on the symbolic meaning of gold, frankincense and myrrh alongside the meanings of Christ's birth and Christ as the star that guides the shepherds and wise men to him. This affected the script, the "presentation," and also the audience's reception of the "presentation" and his sermon.

Nancy writes that "[s]ound has no hidden face," and that "[s]ound essentially comes and expands, or is deferred and transferred"; it is also received by or in relation to "the visible face of a presence subsisting in self" (Nancy 2007, 13-14). Nancy reformulates listening as "not the metaphor for access to self, but as the reality of this access" (Nancy 2007, 12):

> This presence is thus not the position of being-present: it is precisely not that. It is presence in the sense of an "in the presence of" that, itself, is not an "in view of" or a "vis-à-vis." (Nancy 2007, 13)

The listeners of Lim's sermon were not allowed to suspend their disbelief of the "presentation." They were made fully aware that it was a presentation, as Lim used it as an analogy and reflected on the images and symbols "presented" in the presentation to further his message. In the visible presence of Lim and his speaking voice, the "experiential" that Pastor Lim spoke of, became his "present instant" (Nancy 2007, 18) of Christ's gospel message, recalled in the present through Lim. Thus, for twenty-five minutes, Lim became the focus and the face by which he was a visible presence and mediator of the Gospel message.

2.8   Eyes: Watching "Born to Save"

FIG. 46. Nativity scene during "Born to Save"
Photo: Alvin Lim

FIG. 47. Children bear witness to Christ's message.
Photo: Alvin Lim

The presentation[12] begins with an introduction by a host, who gives a short background information of the story and introduces the characters. Again, this clearly marks out the presentation as a performance. Frieda is the main protagonist and she meets Dan her childhood friend. Together, they witness Christ being taken away by the Jews and Frieda recalls the time when, as a child, she lived in Bethlehem and her father was one of the shepherds that met an angel and witnessed Christ in the manger. Celebrations continued around the manger as people from all over visited the infant Jesus, including the three wise men. After they present three gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to Joseph and Mary, the scene shifts back to Freida and Dan, who are offstage. Freida begins to introduce a group of biblical characters, and one by one they retell their personal experiences of how Christ saved them.

I sought to bring the actors closer to the audience as I felt that the stage was quite far away from them and would alienate them from the performance. I bridged the distance by having new characters appear from the entrance of the theatre, facing the stage. The actors moved down the aisles, addressed the audience members and gave them candies.

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[12] More pictures of the production can be found on GLCC's Facebook page at
https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10151913974538668.1073741837.86790613667&type=3

FIG. 48. The three shepherds.
Photo: Alvin Lim

I also added a dance segment towards the end of the performance to introduce the infant

Jesus and show the people of Bethlehem celebrating Jesus' birth. The actors clapped along,

danced and encouraged the audience members to clap too. I managed to implement this

segment a couple of weeks before the show because everyone understood that the Christian

song, "Joy to the World" (which was picked by the Music Director), would mean very little if

everyone stood still and did nothing.

"Born to Save" is first and foremost a fictional story inspired by multiple sources. Only

the gospels by Matthew and Luke write about the Nativity but they are from two

perspectives—Matthew authored the account according to Peter and Luke authored the

account according to Paul. The wise men were only mentioned in the gospel according to

Matthew and the three shepherds were only mentioned in the gospel according to Luke. The Christmas show committee decided that the two narratives should merge and they chose to introduce a fictional narrative (of the Shepherd's daughter) to what is already a disjointed series of perspectives. As mentioned earlier, I had asked the actors to provide backstories to these fictional characters to make them more believable but I also had to find a way to weave in the two time frames of the fictional world and the biblical world. This highlights the mediating elements at work in rewriting the biblical narrative for the stage.

To move the otherwise abrupt transitions from scene to scene, I added a series of questions and answers to the plot: Dan would ask Freida a question and Freida would provide an answer or she would rely on another character to explain how Christ has saved them. The questions from Dan provided Freida with the motivations to narrate the Nativity story. I later realised that while this method moved the narrative along systematically, it was problematic as it added another layer of distance between the story and the audience— the two new characters demonstrated how the performance was contingent on the narration of an outsider or mediator. The English Bible is already contingent on the translators to re-narrate the biblical narratives. The additional characters only further highlight the layers of interpretation. It becomes, as it were, a fiction of a supposed testimony of the Nativity.

The fiction and testimony of the Bible, tested in the model of a live Christmas show, plays out in a complicity between fiction and testimony. Derrida tells us:

> …the possibility of literary fiction haunts so-called truthful, responsible, serious, real testimony as its proper possibility… This haunting is perhaps the passion itself, the passionate place of literary writing …The testimony testifies to nothing less than the instant of an interruption of time and history, a second of interruption in which fiction and testimony find their common resource" (Derrida 2000, 72-73).

I cannot fault the passionate and good intentions of the church members who fictionalise the Gospel testimony (which is itself the literary product of the apostles). I am myself complicit in the reproduction of the Gospels.

What is performed or said for the first time, "if it is a testimony, is already a repetition, at least a repeatability; it is already an iterability, more than once at once, more than an instant in one instant, at the same time; and that being the case, the instant is always divided at its very point, at the point of its writing" (Derrida 2000, 43). At the point of the live staging, fiction and testimony collapse in repetition, and at each point lends itself to further reiteration and re-interpretation. Indeed, the reiteration of the Gospels exceeds the opposition between real and unreal, actual and virtual, factual and fictional (Derrida 2000, 91). A haunting of the text occurs and a reference to a (biblical) truth emerges even as it reiterated through a secondary account, a play, a Christmas show, a literary device, or a false testimony. What then remains is the dead resurrected for Christ's believers to have another say about Christ.

The fictive testimony then shifts into a sermon by Lim. Less framed as a full-scale theatre performance, a sermon organises and forms an argument and is delivered primarily by an individual. Lim's argument in his sermon is: "No one can save himself (from sin). That is why Christmas is beautiful because 'unto us, a Saviour is born.'" More than that, during Lim's monologue, while stressing the words "God" and "Saviour," he gestures frequently to the set and to invisible characters, referring to both what unfolded earlier on stage and to the imagined past of Christ. His sermon is theatrical because it still appeals to the senses, as he fully engages his audience with acting, voice production, and slideshow.

Doctrinally speaking, Lim's message constitutes the fundamental tenet of the Protestant faith: through Christ alone all sins are forgiven. However, the means by which this is conveyed can differ from preacher to preacher. Lim uses his PowerPoint slides and an

assortment of media to tell his message. This has become commonplace for contemporary

pastors when they present their sermons. As a pastor stands alone on stage, all focus is on

him. He guides the ebb and flow of the message, and it is as much about the message as it is

about the delivery, the performance and the intended purpose of evangelising and converting

people into Christianity.

2.8.1   Evangelism: A Local Perspective

GLCC's Christmas show might be framed as a Gospel message and presentation but the

rationale behind it is fundamentally the same as the concerts and musicals put up by the

churches GLCC is openly against. City Harvest Church's "Crossover Project" for instance,

provides funding for Sun Ho's (Pastor Kong Hee's wife) music career. The project is framed

as "engaging of our contemporary culture with relevance, and creatively serving our society

with authenticity as successful model citizens for the glory of God" (From "Crossover

Project" at CHC's website, retrieved from www.chc.org.sg/crossover/english at May 31,

2014).

FIG. 49. "The Origins of the Crossover"
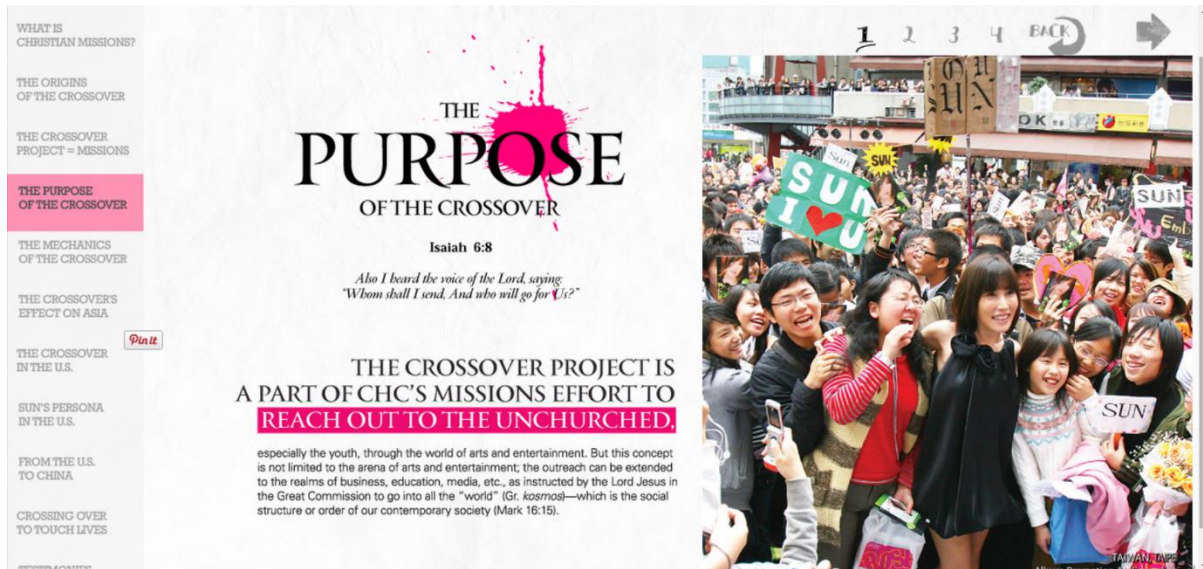Screenshot retrieved from CHC Crossover Project website

FIG. 50. "The Purpose of the Crossover."
Screenshot retrieved from CHC Crossover Project website

In both GLCC and CHC, technological elements are heavily utilised to perform their Gospel message and to evangelise the "unchurched", as CHC puts it. What GLCC takes issue with is the supposed secular methods that CHC uses to conduct its Crossover missions, most typified by Sun Ho. In the music video for her dance song, 'China Wine', she calls herself Sun a.k.a. Geisha, and proudly holds up the oriental stereotype. Sun repeats the words "China Wine, China Wine… (with the dutty wine)" and makes a reference to *The Dutty Wine* (which stands for "Dirty Wind"), a song by Tony Matterhorn, who is also featured in the video. Making references to the Jamaican Dutty Wine and the dance moves in the *The Dutty Wine* video, 'China Wine' can be interpreted as a fusion of Asian and Jamaican cultures, projecting a supposed globalised identity and the Crossover's overall ecumenical agenda. However, what seems obvious to GLCC is the apparent lack of Christian references or standards in the video, which they strictly believe are necessary for the proper conduct of Christians.

Choo of GLCC condemns "China Wine" in his YouTube video[13]: "Half nude, doing provocative things with men, bunch of men, in the name of God? Saying this is how you reach the word for Jesus… China Wine" (Choo 2012). In another GLCC uploaded video to YouTube[14], Pastor Jason Lim, who has a YouTube channel where he uploads his sermons (he also has a Twitter account, a Facebook page and a personal website), can be seen making indirect and direct references to CHC's practices and calls them false prophets, "who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive" (He quoted Romans 16:17-18; J. Lim 2013).

At the video timing of 15:30, Lim shows a picture of City Harvest Church's congregation and imagines the response a Christian would have if he or she visited those churches: "They are very big, the music is very shiok[15], the lighting is very exciting, the Pastor so handsome and he preaches so well…" indirectly suggesting that they are "false teachers and prophets" who charm the public into attending their services.

Incidentally, the video opens with a 1949 animated production of "Little Red Riding Hood," with the intention of comparing the animated wolf or "a wolf in sheep clothing" to false churches and pastors who appear charismatic and appealing. At 39:49, Pastor Lim begins to identify who he deems as false teachers: the image of CHC's Pastor Kong eventually appears on screen as he next urges his congregation to be discerning and not to accept them as men of God. "You have to assess yourself," he recommends but goes on to imply that certain pastors are "false teachers" by constantly showing slides of specific pastors whilst discussing the traits of "false teachers." His slides show images of New Creation Church and City Harvest Church as he talks about their pastors. Though he implicates

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[13] Please watch 52:49 for his statements on Sun Ho.
[14] The aforementioned video can be accessed at YouTube, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PdVmxcAye2g.
[15] A colloquial expression to mean "enjoyable," "pleasurable" or pleasing to the ears in the above case.

himself by placing his own photograph and the end of the pastors' photographs, the effect is he also reaffirms to his audience members that as their preacher they should listen to him.

This is immediately followed by a series of references to Acts 28 where he explains GLCC's own approach, which is to "teach through the Bible" and a Christian should "commit to a church" that does its teaching through the Bible. While this is vague in terms of how exactly does one 'teach through the Bible' in the video, when the passage on teaching through the Bible is referred to in the New Testament in relation to commitment to a church, this has a double meaning for GLCC.

First, GLCC is in the process of building a bigger church building as they have been renting ballrooms at a hotel to hold their Sunday services. The commitment to a church, or in this case, to GLCC, means that the Great Commission of bringing more believers to Christianity is met, along with the possibility and need of expanding the size of the church building. As with evangelical practices, churches are constantly thinking of ways to reach non-believers. Naturally, membership will grow due to those evangelical projects, and churches in Singapore continually face the issue of finding new spaces to accommodate their expansion. When a church expands, it must ensure that membership numbers are sustained and the new building can be maintained along with new staff members, facilities, and services to manage and provide for the new church members. An outreach programme can perform the dual purpose of fulfilling the Great Commission of converting non-believers to Christianity, and providing the means of expanding a church through increased donations and tithes.

Second, during GLCC's Sunday services, clapping and elaborate gestures are prohibited but this does not make it any less performative. Both GLCC's Sunday services and their Christmas shows reveal themselves as performances that maintain and sustain the practice of evangelism and the Christian identity. Boundaries are crossed and performance

elements may spill into the supposed sacred realm of the pulpit. To begin with, the scenes of preaching and pastoral care are already scenes that the church members watch. The "teaching through the Bible" during the sermons in turn emphasises the Christian's proper conduct in the eyes of the Church. This sets the structure of church performances: a biblical teaching may be proclaimed through the performance of the biblical passages on stage; as the preacher or pastor performs, the church members watch on and imagine or know that there is another set of eyes watching them in all aspects of their Christian life. Commitment to a church (and being committed to being in a church building during a church service) entails to being co-participants to the church's scene of Christianity.

2.9   The Scene of Christianity

> The scene is primitive, not locatable in memory. The absolute eye watched us, Augustine says, he looked through the lattice of our flesh, he caressed us with his voice, and we hasten on his scent like drunk hounds. We believe we take hold of the divine, but then, all of a sudden, his calm enraptures us, and uncovered, lashed, outside ourselves, for one moment we find ourselves gaping in his beatitude. (Lyotard 2000, 53)

I hope that the focused reading of my involvement in a church can shed light on the possible tensions between churches, doctrines and performances; and how churches collectively perform a constant and changing dialogue of what it means to be a Christian. I am largely responsible for drawing on the techniques and performance elements common from other performance sources, but I was also encouraged by the church to incorporate popular techniques and media in staging Christian performances, as they had already done for their earlier shows and weekly services. Thus, GLCC presents an example of the ways in which church practices are already merging former elements of contention together in a

conservative Protestant context. I am not certain if GLCC will cross more boundaries in future or allow its congregation to clap or dance during services. I have however shown how a supposed conservative church might sometimes modify her practices for the sake of evangelism. GLCC's Christmas show performs the contradictions between its beliefs and the common approaches they share with other churches they openly oppose. I am also aware that the focus on Christian performances in Singapore is on the church pastor—as the director, actor, leader and messenger of God—who can lead his church in the incorporation of technology and secular forms in their church performances.

The promulgation of church beliefs via theatrical and digital mediums means that churches have to convey their messages through mainstream and supposed secular channels. That is not to define technology as secular but the distinction between secular and non-secular has become blurred. The blurring occurs when the rationale or intention of a church somehow justifies the means. Borrowing from Giorgio Agamben's concept of profanation, I contend that the process of removing, editing, the use of theatre, and the uploading of sermons to YouTube in the name of the church, returns the Bible to "the common use of men" (Agamben 2007, 73).

Agamben distinguishes secularization and profanation and provides a way to understand the process and necessity of profanation:

> Secularization is a form of repression. It leaves intact the forces it deals with by simply moving them from one place to another...
>
> Profanation, however, neutralizes what it profanes. Once profaned, that which was unavailable and separate loses its aura and is returned to use. Both are political operations: the first guarantees the exercise of power by carrying it back to a sacred model; the second deactivates the apparatuses of power and returns to common use the spaces that power had seized. (Agamben 2007, 77)

"Born to Save" makes the passage from "the sacred" of the God-inspired Word to the

"profane," which however "inappropriate" in its mix with many other available online profanities, reuses the "sacred" in "play" (Agamben 2007, 75). It recycles (or "drops" as Agamben prefers) the myth and "preserves the rite" but Agamben tells us that conversely, "it effaces the rite and allows the myth to survive," (Agamben 2007, 75-76) albeit in a different form. The Christmas show is not a form of secularisation but profanation, however amateurish it is in terms of its production value, in comparison with other theatre and concert productions put up by other megachurches.

This perspective allows one to understand how church leaders "can cope with the confusion between the divine and human" (Agamben 2007, 79). A church can maintain its religious authority by holding on to its dogma and God whilst simultaneously operating within the human realm, in human terms and tools. Commenting on the theologians, pontiffs, and emperors of the Christian religion, Agamben argues that it is easy to understand why these religious leaders have to show "obsessive care and implacable seriousness in ensuring, as far as possible, the coherence and intelligibility of the notions of transubstantiation in the sacrifice of the mass and incarnation and *homousia* in the dogma of the trinity." This is because of the "mingling of two operations" between the profane, or what is consumed by men, and the sacred, or what is "assigned to the gods" (Agamben 2007, 79). GLCC, then, exercises a similar 'obsessive care' and 'implacable seriousness' when it comes to the notions of incarnation and Christ as Saviour, and the consumable musical aesthetics. In a similar way, as pointed out by Agamben, "[w]hat is at stake here was nothing less than the survival of a religious system that had involved God" as Christ, dying for our sins, or "the doctrine of incarnation guaranteed that divine and human nature were both present without ambiguity in the same person" (Agamben 2007, 79).

However, Agamben makes a further point: "Play, in our society, also has an episodic character, after which normal life must once again continue on its course" (Agamben 2007,

87). In that sense, the weekly attendance at the church can be viewed as a form of play. But he warns us that an "evil magician can capture and bewitch and use against us," and one of those "toys" that Agamben eventually talks about are the apparatuses of new media that are used to perform the weekly plays of Christianity.

However, I must depart slightly from Agamben's reading of the "capitalist cult" and his "high priest of the capitalist religion." Like him, my observations of capitalist and spectacular religion in the form of megachurches and even in GLCC's model have shown that there is no easy way to identify the supposed "pure" means, defined as "a praxis that, while firmly maintaining its nature as a means, is emancipated from its relationship to an end;" (86) or acting "on behaviors that have been separated from themselves and thus detached from any relationship to an end" (Agamben 2007, 87).

I must consider the other possibility of profaning besides "neutralising profanation" that apparatuses of new media can participate in. It is precisely the aim of contemporary churches to constantly reinvent themselves and find new uses of new media apparatuses. Through profane means and church members forming relationships online or digitally, the play of the Word "frees and distracts humanity from the sphere of the sacred, without simply abolishing it" (Agamben 2007, 76). In a way, this means that if technology can overcome the limits of the physical world or the supposed transcendence of God, it is substantiated as a method to make the connection to God or to be conceived in the name of God and Christ. The capitalist high priest is not a spectral presence that captures or nullifies pure means as Agamben thinks. On the contrary, the capitalist high priest can be an actual human person who showcases his mastery and ability to recreate the experience of the word in the sphere of the media, who is in constant and episodic play, and who proves his assumed legitimacy through the prosperity and expansion of his church.

The scene (of live sermons and presentations) next moves to online media, where the agendas of prosperity and expansion can most gather pace. In the next section, I shall attempt to articulate the phenomenon of contemporary Christianity in Singapore and present various faces of its technology.

3

Faces of Charismatic Technology

> Everything depends on our manipulating technology in the proper manner as a means. We will, as we say, "get" technology "spiritually in hand." We will master it. The will to mastery becomes all the more urgent the more technology threatens to slip from human control. (Heidegger 1977, 5)

3.1

My focus on pastors reveals them as the central figures of their churches. The tools they have available amplify and accentuate that identity. However, what Lyotard reminds us is we have no mastery of the "scene" (in my opinion, it suggests the scene of Adam and Eve driven out of Eden and away from God's presence; it could also be the scene of God's disappearance). No face nor medium can take hold of the divine, at least in the Christian sense, not even the removal of images or icons. In fact, the removal of images and icons only reinforces God's disappearance, such that His face can be substituted by technological and charismatic faces.

Nevertheless, there is still the thought that technology can be mastered or one can get "technology spiritually at hand" as Heidegger puts it. Indeed, the issue of technology in religion becomes more urgent when "technology threatens to slip from human control" and even more so when God threatens to slip from human understanding. In place of the faceless God, despite the best efforts to know Him, technology can give that false sense of

encountering Him. The faceless God as opposed to the many faces of Taoist deities, makes possible the opportunity to mask God and replace Him with a new image. When images or icons were removed from the church, in place of them is the more tangible, material, human image. Technology amplifies this image even as it fragmentises the human face.

In this section, I shall show how the removal of images and icons of God and Christ has provided the conditions by which the faces of Charismatic leaders can assert themselves as the faces of Christianity. Men in suits with online profile pages dominate the scene of Christianity in Singapore. Pastor Kong Hee for example has two Facebook pages, Kong Hee ministries and his personal page called "Kong Hee." He also has a Twitter page, an online broadcasting station called "City TV" (http://www.chc.org.sg/citytv/), and he is frequently featured on the Trinity Broadcasting Network[16] in his programme, "Alive with Kong." Kong frequently uses those channels to promote his teachings and quotes extensively from a range of Christians to support his messages.
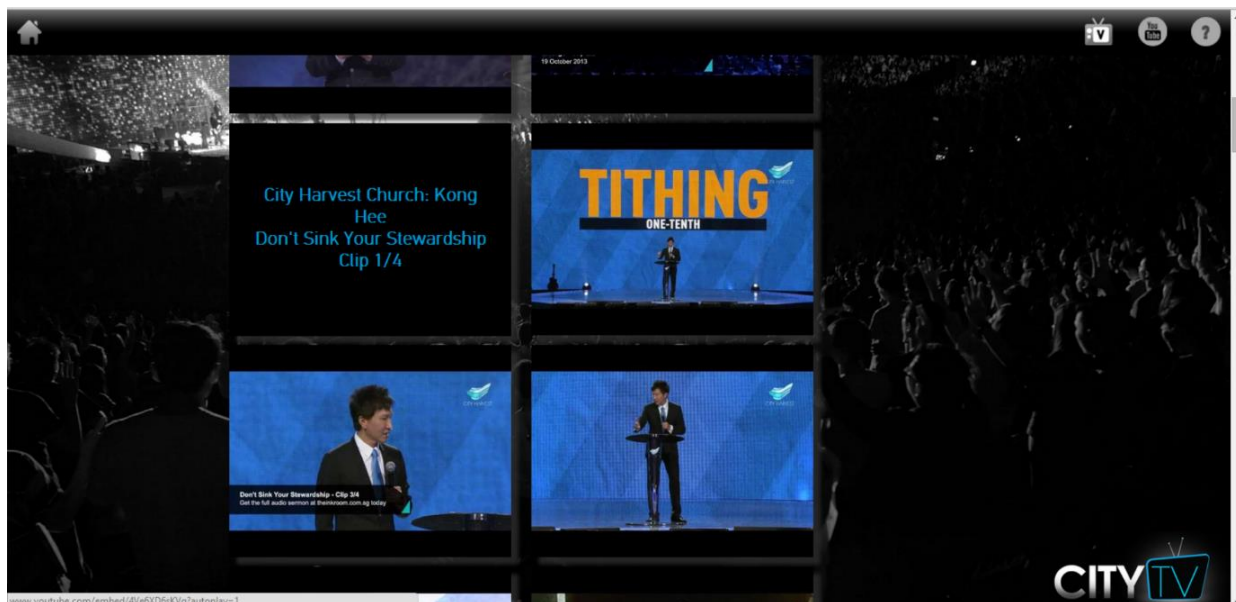

FIG. 51. Screenshot of "City TV".
Source: Retrieved from http://www.chc.org.sg/citytv/videos on June 5, 2014.

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[16] Pastor Joseph Prince of New Creation Church is also prominently featured in ITBN, with a his own webpage tab under "Programs". See http://www.itbn.org/index/program/lib/programs/sublib/Joseph+Prince

FIG. 52. Screenshot of Kong's Twitter Profile page.
Source: Retrieved from https://twitter.com/konghee on June 5, 2014.

FIG. 53. Screenshot of Kong's tweet on May 22 that shows how he conducts his
pastoral care to a church member.
Source: Retrieved from https://twitter.com/konghee on May 22, 2014.

FIG. 54. Screenshot of Kong's tweets on May 12, which show his church's weekend services on Mother's Day.
Source: Retrieved from https://twitter.com/konghee on May 22, 2014.

FIG. 55. Screenshot of Kong's tweets on May 9, which show how he would typically quote from various sources and in different languages.
Source: Retrieved from https://twitter.com/konghee on May 22, 2014.

A message from Pastor Kong would usually be repeated on several platforms—such as the one below where he tweets about his second day of filming "Alive with Kong" with his wife Sun Ho.

FIG. 56. Screenshot of Kong's tweets on May 7 and May 13, which are about his
filming commitments, "Alive with Kong" and "City News".
Source: Retrieved from https://twitter.com/konghee on May 22, 2014.

Pastor Kong's Facebook Page (see below) also collects a gallery of images, which are shared across his Twitter and Facebook pages.
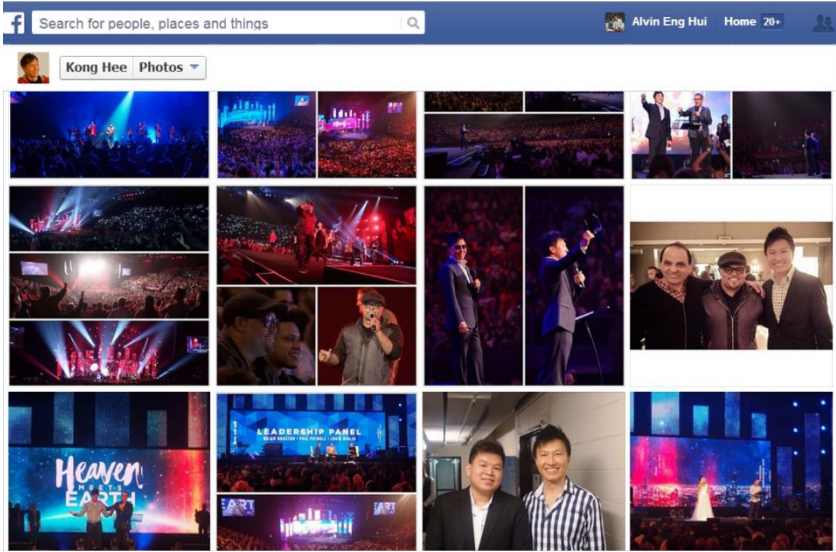

FIG. 57. Screenshot of Kong's Facebook "Photos" on May 13.
Source: Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/konghee on May 22, 2014.

FIG. 58. Screenshot of Kong's Facebook "Status update" that is also repeated on his
Twitter account.
Source: Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/konghee on May 22, 2014.

The above Figure 58 is evidence of the key difference between CHC and GLCC. Christ

is performed by an actor and the scene of Christ's crucifixion is over-dramatised with images

of lightning flashing across the backdrop and blood on the actor's body. The short message

on Kong's "wall" however shows a similar message to Pastor Lim's: "The pain & death that

Jesus suffered is [sic] the price of our freedom from sin."

FIG. 59. Screenshot of Kong's Facebook page.
Source: Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/konghee on May 22, 2014.

In sum, Kong Hee privileges the bodily representation of Christ but simultaneously entangles himself in this corporeal image, an image upon the image of himself. This dramatisation of God is centred on, first and foremost, him. With stage effects and lighting, he reappears on social media networks to claim the scene from God and Jesus Christ. His superimposition of his image over God can also be observed in his basic function as a preacher, when he reiterates Biblical passages.

In his sermon of "City Harvest Church: Kong Hee—Don't Sink Your Stewardship" (Kong 2013). Kong Hee alludes to the book of Genesis at the start of clip two to equate a tithe to being a tenth (of one's money). I believe he is making references to Genesis 14:18-20:

> And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. (He was priest of God Most High.) And he blessed him and said, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!" And Abram gave him a tenth of everything (*ESV*).

In this particular event, "a tenth of everything" refers to Abram's gift to Melchizedek, king of Salem a tenth of everything that he plundered when he rescued his nephew Lot. It is also clear in Hebrews 7:4 in the New Testament that the supposed tithe was not for God: "See how great this man was to whom Abraham the patriarch gave a tenth of the spoils!" (*ESV*). The problem with Pastor Kong's careless allusion to Genesis is that he conveniently connected "one tenth" (Hebrew: רשעמ) to the tithes that were more properly introduced in Mosaic Law (Leviticus 27:30-34 and Numbers 18:21-26). The second instance one-tenth is mentioned in Genesis is when Jacob vowed to give a tenth of what he will have if God grants him safe passage; it is a conditional vow:

> If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, and this

stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house. And of all that you give me I will give a full

tenth to you (*ESV*, Genesis 28:20-22).

In both instances, the vows are personal and an individual promise to a person or to

God. Jacob's pre-Mosaic conditional vow does not predict the overall doctrine of tithing, yet

alone suggests that it must be a definite figure of one-tenth. Instead of explicating Jacob's

faith and thankfulness to God, Kong Hee first begins to explain that "tithe" is "ten percent of

your increase or income." He next uses his own example to praise himself for giving tithes

since he was sixteen. This leads up to his quote of Malachi 3:10-12; the verses are taken out

of context to explain why the church members have to give tithes. To give tithes to the

church, according to Kong, means that they may gain seven-fold back. To see if this works,

Kong asks his congregation to "test God" by tithing: "God says, test me in this. You tithe and

see if I will not bless you in seven areas," he says, without citation and more crucially,

subverting Jacob's conditional vow—if God grants me safe passage, I will tithe as opposed to

if I tithe, God will bless me in seven ways.

Malachi, in its context, is a rebuke on the Israelites, and predicts the "messenger" (John

the Baptist) and the "Lord" or "messenger of the covenant" (3:1). The biblical message,

however, questions the reader and posits that not many "may abide the day of his coming"

and "stand when he appeareth" (3:2). The verses in Kong's PowerPoint slide omits the

important warning in verse 9: "Ye are cursed with a curse: for ye have robbed me, even this

whole nation" (*KJV*, Malachi 3:9). In any case, the message is meant for the Israelites, who

throughout history has disobeyed their God—despite that, God promises salvation to those

that "feared the Lord" and "a book of remembrance was written before him for them" (3:16),

making a reference to the writing of the Bible.

The selective nature of Kong's message allows him to sneak in two messages or "benefits" for those who tithe to his church:

Benefit five: Our career will become productive.

Benefit six: Our investment will prosper.

The other five benefits are based on Malachi 3:10-12 but the verses makes no reference to the contemporary concerns of "career" and "investment." This is a misleading and second alteration to the Malachi 3 passage. But more crucially, this message is not contained within the church or accepted by its members, yet it is widely available. As such, counter-arguments and counter-performances can appear to test Kong (and not God).

3.2 The Lure of Bodies without Bodies

To speak an act: can this be done? Is it possible to speak seduction—the always scandalous intervention of love in theory, of pleasure in knowledge? (Felman 2003, 5)

The speech act of Kong Hee constitutes a lure, which in a manner of writing echoes Shoshana Felman's attempt to theoretically articulate the two theories of psychoanalysis and the performative in a new light: "the scandal of the seduction of the human body insofar as it speaks—the scandal of the promise of love insofar as this promise is par excellence the promise of love insofar as this promise is par excellence the promise that cannot be kept" (Felman 2003, 5). Kong's speech act moves between the seduction of his body speaking, that is, the bodily performative, and the promise of love from God, if and only if it is mediated by and through CHC and its pastors. There is something enticing in this formulation. The scandal is not so much the unreliability of the message (such as taking verses out of context) but the irreducible reliability of the promise. Kong Hee performs a speech; he acts out the

speech. He promises. Implied in the performative is a promise (not made by God alone) by the promise made by God via Kong. When Felman writes that "[t]he speaking body is scandalous precisely to the extent that its performance is, necessarily, either tragic or comic" and "the scandal consists in the fact that the act cannot know what it is doing" (Felman 2003, 67), she is expressing the paradox that Nietzsche speak of when he writes "To breed an animal with the right to make promises—is not this the paradoxical problem nature has set itself with regard to man? And is it not man's true problem?" (quoted by Felman 2003, 1). The paradox or scandal, I believe, is that man cannot explicitly know but promises anyway by way of speech (and this is the scandal J. L. Austin via Felman discovered) of the undecidability and the constant interference between act and knowledge. Kong Hee has to reiterate weekly, both live and via online speech acts, the promises of God. His message is reliable insofar as he can refer to the Bible and God outside his speech. There is a certain unaccountability implied when biblical messages are reduced to an entirely self-referential system, determined by the simplified New International Version of the Bible and its own codes, verses and numbers, picked at will (similar to the figure of Don Juan as explicated by Felman on page 22). His message is reliable as long as it is set within the privileged status of his church: "Last twenty-four years we are a tithing church. Today, nations are calling you blessed." The "promise of constancy" or the constative promises that the meaning of Kong's words will last; a promise written in digital codes on his projected PowerPoint slides is ensured in its meaning when it evokes Heaven and God (and nations):"God says, test me in this. You tithe and see if I will not bless you in seven areas."

When he invokes God, he in fact does nothing but "promise the constative" (Felman 2003, 21) and appeals to the erotic, the sensual, the immediate and the aesthetic. More significantly, Kong claims that God speaks to him. In a YouTube video of a church conference in Australia, posted by the user "anointedforworship," after Kong was accused of

criminal breach of trust and misappropriating church building funds, Kong makes a claim that

God had sent a message to him. The video now taken down (see Figure 60) includes the

message that the copyright of the video belongs to Kong and not God, even though God is as
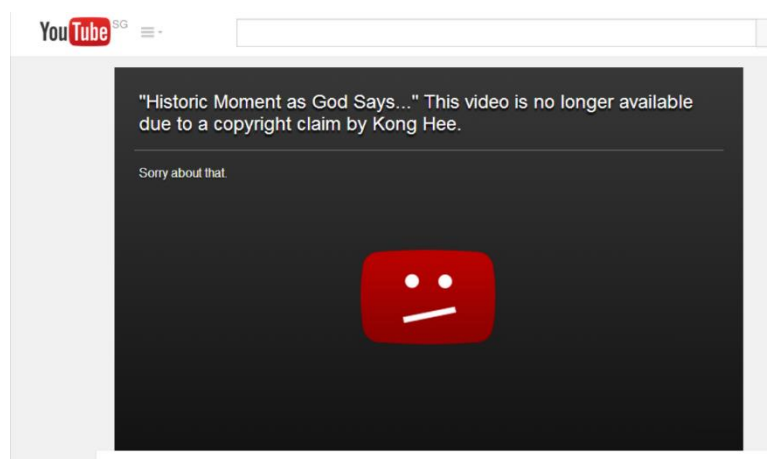
much crucial in passing the message to Kong.

FIG. 60. Screenshot of YouTube video that states Kong Hee's claim to the video.
Source: Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1XIF3leTHcg on May 22,
2014.

According to Kong, he said, "For the first time in eight months, God, I heard Him cry.

And he said 'My son, Kong, thank you. Thank you for going through this. I need you to go

through this alone, so that you and City Harvest Church can be the man and the ministry I

call it to be. I'm so sorry, but you need to go through this by yourself, to bring a change to

your generation." ("'God apologising to Kong Hee' section was taken out of context: City

Harvest Church." Retrieved from https://sg.news.yahoo.com/video-of-city-harvest-church-

founder-kong-hee%E2%80%99s-sermon-ignites-online-outrage-174425261.html on June 6,

2014.)

That "God told me" is not only constative but also it is a performative utterance made

in the context of his church and his technological backdrop. As an echo to Kierkegaard's

erotic stage, Felman provides a theoretical framework to analyse Kong's seduction: the

message of promises is reliable insofar as it is understood as a constative, by referring to an

already translated Bible, and as a performative. Kong makes a virtue of the constative with his bodily speech act and his personal relationship with God.

Butler points out in the re-print of Felman's book that "as bodily, the speech act never had the sovereignty it sometimes tries to claim for itself" (Butler 2003, 114). However, pastors like Kong Hee do not only cast speech acts in bodily speech acts, they also reperform speech acts online, without their physical bodies, but in alternate "bodies." Bodily speech acts without bodies, as it were, reappear as online videos, twitter tweets and Facebook wall messages. The message is literally multiplied. That, as it was for print, has several implications to our understanding of speech acts and how God's sovereignty is reclaimed as Kong's authority.

3.3   Charismatic Speech Acts

Another common practice of CHC (and others) is the practice of speaking in tongues. Lana Yiu-Lan Khong records the first appearance in Singapore of this practice. In 1972, a group of students received what she calls a "Spirit-baptism with the gift of tongues" (Khong 2012, 56). In an account about one of the students' first experience of speaking in tongues, Khong describes the student as feeling "a "click" in his jaws and he started to speak an unintelligible sentence" (Khong 2012, 56).

Speaking in tongues presents a problem to the definition of speech acts that often assume the intelligibility of the language. In this case, the utterances are purely performative, if not gibberish without interpretation. To CHC, however, the presence of speaking in tongues is evidence of the Holy Spirit, much like the speaking of Hokkien in the examples of previous chapters. The key difference, however, is that the speaking in tongues in CHC is not often followed by translation and interpretation. Tan-Chow Mei Ling explains that "the encounter and experience of the Spirit is pivotal and shapes the Pentecostal spirituality (Tan-

Chow 2007, 25). Citing Paul Fiddes, a British Baptist theologian who authored the book, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity*, Tan-chow writes that "[a]uthentic Pentecostal worship reconstructs the self in relation to God, who is *Other*, and simultaneously reorientates us to those others with whom God is in communion" (Tan-Chow 2007, 25). Furthermore, she locates God's telos within what Michael Welker describes as "concentrated presence" (Welker 1994, 222).

This "concentrated presence" echoes the concentrated presence and intensity of Taoist spirit mediums publicly performing for their community. In a similar fashion, speaking in tongues orientates all things to the Spirit, drawing the attention of others to the "concentrated presence" of God. In Tan-Chow's book, she also mentions the empowerment that such public spiritual gifts give to believers.

In another video available online, this concentration of "speech acts" is clearly exemplified (see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DA_rsk9yI8M posted by the user "Personify Jesus: Grace" on 24 September 2012). Without a proper interpretation of the spoken "tongue," Kong is seen in the video to interspace tongues with phrases of praise to God. It may seem that those lines are interpretations of what is spoken in tongues but there is no clear indication that this is the case. Nevertheless, the camera cuts to show the combined efficacy of the speech acts, the song and the ambience—the audience members lift their hands, shut their eyes and show how Kong's words affect them as these surround the auditorium through the speakers. The experience of God or His spirit comes to fruition in the mediated presence of Him through Kong via a stereophonic system.

It is now common in churches, at least in Singapore, to have prayers and messages amplified through speakers. Private words to God are now projected, such that as all the church members close their eyes, they can still hear the sound of the speaker on stage in their heads, as if they too pray along and the speaker's prayer is theirs too. At my church,

Emmanuel Bible-Presbyterian Church, that is also a common experience and my pastor's prayer and three-fold Amen ring through the room as he speaks into a microphone. We all say 'Amen' with each line of a prayer that is addressed to God—but surely that is also addressed to us since the prayer is amplified and publicly heard?

Philip Auslander describes "the experience of liveness" as not being "limited to specific performer-audience interactions; it is the feeling of always being connected to other people, of continuous, technologically mediated co-presence with others known and unknown" (Auslander 2008, 111). The experience of God need not be the sole interaction between the pastor and the audience. Church members and I can experience a church service as a performance that "merges and juxtaposes different technologies": human performance, machine performance, the musician's craft, and digital technology, among others (Auslander 2008, 115). With or without a sound system, the speaking pastor already talks about his inspiration from the Holy Spirit who guides him in speaking the appropriate words for his prayer. The pastor's voice performs as a medium of transmission. A private prayer always has the determined addressees of God and oneself but when the prayer becomes public, the addressees are multiplied. In such a public setting, saying a prayer also means a shared hearing of the projected prayer, overhearing the 'Amen' from a neighbour, and interpreting the prayer as it is broadcasted. The message (prayer or sermon) immediately becomes theatrical, without which there is no potential for it to be heard, understood, and more importantly, affect or move the audience till the next weekly service. Church performances are, as Auslander would perhaps conclude, "internally and externally mediated confluences of varied technologies" (Auslander 2008, 118). A church performance that privileges the pastor as the medium of transmission brings about the effects of what I call destabilization, which is borrowed from Jacques Derrida's concept of "systems of *marks* that all have…this curious tendency: to increase *simultaneously* the reserves of random indetermination *and* the

powers of coding or over-coding (Derrida 2007b, 346). Although Derrida refers to language as his example of a system of mark, his concept is applicable to the context of pulpit preaching. Derrida writes that the "effects of destabilization is at once multiplied and limited (relatively cushioned or neutralized)" (Derrida 2007b, 346). The effects of pulpit preaching can also be described as multiplied because of the confluence of technologies and "the multiplicity of languages and codes that are intersecting with each other at every instant" (not just the activity of language translation but the digital codes that the preached message is translated into). The limit of confluence, as I understand it, is that the addresser can choose quite specifically a message that is constructed and pieced together, all the more so when he is aware that his "live" message would later be recorded and published to an indeterminable, even unknown addressee. This system of marks, I believe, creates chances of repeats, counterperformances and confessions because, whether consciously or unconsciously, Christians are constantly under the impression of the Word and words and must therefore constantly become subjects of addressers who declare their (special) relation to God.

3.4   Counterperformances and Confessions

When the manifestations of spirituality are so public and encompassing as a performance, the failure or misfire of the performative is more greatly felt. If the allegations are true (the court has yet to make a ruling), they would completely undermine the authority that Kong has set himself with the use of speech acts and tongues. Even without the court ruling, the allegations have already given rise to groups of dissent online. By making himself such a public figure, it is inevitable that Pastor Kong Hee would encounter some form of counterperformance. The performance of Kong shares the same virtual space with many others who can undermine, resist, critique, support, or "like" his image. As mentioned earlier,

the court case on the alleged misappropriation of church funds became the catalyst by which counterperformances gained traction online.

The Straits Times dedicates an entire web address to the whole case at http://www.straitstimes.com/chc_funds_case. On 5th of May 2014, the judge ruled that the CHC leaders have a case to answer regarding their usage of church funds[17] (CNA, 5 May 2014). On this particular day, Pastor Kong tweeted a series of messages via his twitter account, which goes by the user name, "@konghee" (See Figure 61).

FIG. 61. Screenshot of Kong Hee's Twitter account @konghee two days after the May 5, 2014 court proceedings.
Source: Retrieved from https://www.twitter.com/konghee on May 22, 2014.

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[17] The full article can be retrieved from http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/city-harvest-leaders-have/1095294.html. Accessed on May 6, 2014.

FIG. 62. More recent photograph of Kong Hee praying with other pastors.
Source: Screenshot retrieved from https://www.twitter.com/konghee on June 7, 2014.

Platforms like Twitter provide Kong with the resources to write text, post images, quote from the Bible and quote extensively from past and present eminent Christians. Kong is able to portray himself as surrounded by other Christians, where he is often at the centre of the imaging. This is an extension of what Joy Tong describes in her earlier case study on Kong and CHC:

> Thousands of people in the audience rise to their feet, clapping and singing with vigor and excitement; at times they shout and jump, at times weep and kneel, under the professional leading of the worship leader. The scenario holds people in awe and engrossing atmosphere turns into a perfect channel for them to release their feelings. Preaching, too, is restylized to fit its young audiences: the sermons are practical and less-dogmatic; the preaching styles are highly interactive; and even the preachers, like show or television host, move around with passionate voice, gestures, personal stories, and sometimes dramatic action to engage the audience. (Tong 2008, 192-193)

The interactivity extends online and many of the images fit Tong's description. His tweets are often retweeted or marked as "favourite." Kong's tweets enable mainstream media and individuals to recontextualise them for new purposes. As with the video recordings of

Kong's sermons, these tweets and videos can be scrutinised and commented on. Widespread criticism or "confessions" also started to appear right after the court case began.

FIG. 63. A post on "CHC Confessions", Facebook on May 16, 2014.
Source: Screenshot retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/CHCConfessions on May 22, 2014.
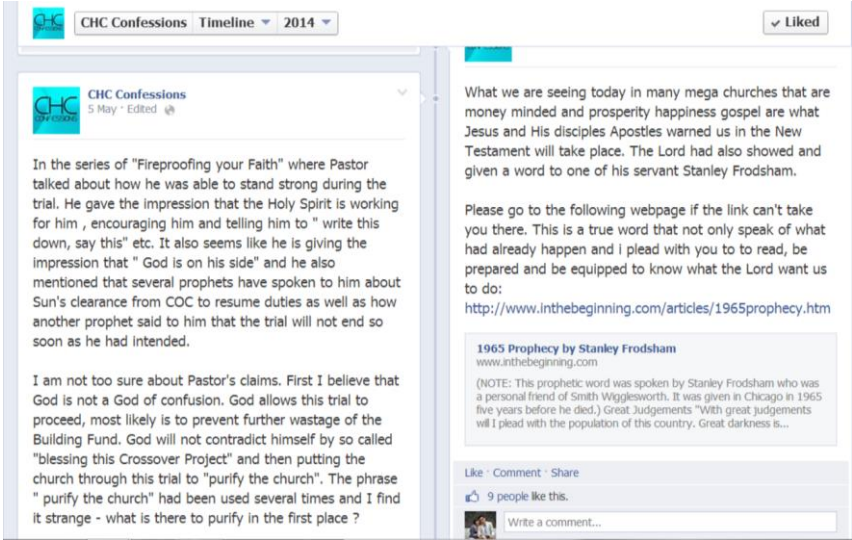

FIG. 64. A post on "CHC Confessions" in response the May 5 court ruling, Facebook on 5 May 2014.
Source: Screenshot retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/CHCConfessions on May 22, 2014.

A similar act can be observed in these confessions. Words are cut and pasted, links are

provided, and spoken words are taken out of context, church services, tweets and videos are

referred to.

FIG. 65. Another post doubting the message of Pastor Kong, Facebook on April 1, 2014.
Source: Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/CHCConfessions on May 22, 2014.

However, one of the many "confessions" (see Figure 66) of ex-members of CHC perhaps

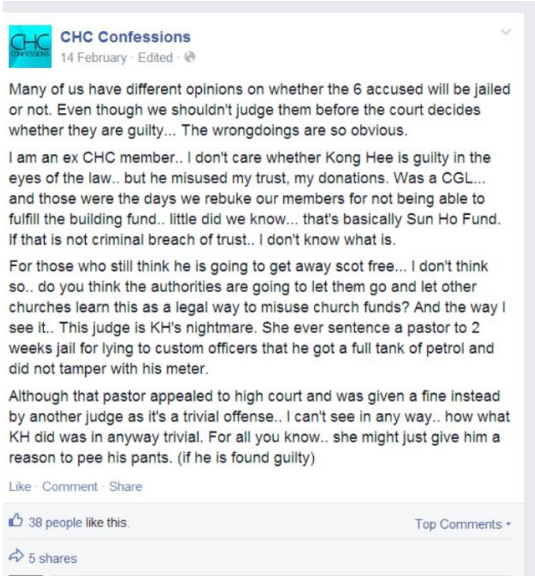offers an insight into what a confession can mean in new media.

FIG. 66. A "confession" made by an ex-CHC member, Facebook on February 14, 2014.
Source: Retrieved from
https://www.facebook.com/CHCConfessions/posts/751669238185789 on May 22, 2014

Confessions offer up an uneasy relationship between the confessor and the confessed. In "Composing "Circumfession"" Derrida demonstrates how we can read the "meaningless" work of CHC Confessions. Derrida writes:

> [W]hen one confesses, one always confesses the other. One confesses the other. Even if I confess myself, if I confess having done this or that, I am confessing another one. That's the structure of confession. I cannot confess myself. If I confess that I did so and so, that is the other. That is already the other I'm confessing. I make the other confess the crime; otherwise, I couldn't confess. There is this division, this divisibility of confession which structures the confession, so that I never confess myself. A confession is never mine.
>
> … The confession is the other's confession in me, which deprives the confession of any common sense. It is meaningless. A confession must remain meaningless. (Derrida 2005a, 25)

When the anonymous "ex CHC member" confesses, he or she confesses nothing but implicates the other, Pastor Kong, in his or her confession. He or she confesses Kong's confessions. In a literal sense, the ex "cell group leader" confesses Kong's guilt and declares him guilty. The person is masked behind a screen but at the same time, the anonymous makes a claim, bearing witness to what Kong had supposedly done to him or her: "misused my trust." Such an event of confession, to paraphrase Geoffrey Bennington, disrupts the kind of positive infinity that we often call "God" (Bennington 2005, 65). To confess is to subvert—whether it is the authoritative message from Kong, or the individual who writes back as another anonymous voice against the public figure. An online anonymous confession embodies and merges the constative and the performative. In writing, it evokes the life experience of going to CHC, as much as it extends out to another sphere (of writing). God is outplayed and cast out of the event—He is no longer the addressee insofar as the mediated structure of presenting anonymity "defies any gathering into a presence" (Bennington 2005, 65). This gathering of an online presence terminates and subverts Kong's speech acts because

when unpacked, there is only the interminable collapse of Kong's relation to the other (ex CHC member).

3.5   140 Characters, Verses out of Context and the Frame

Biblical verses are often "cut" and "pasted" on projection screens. Pastors have often relied on projection screens to display biblical verses. This can be understood as an extension of the convention of referencing the Bible but I argue that the mediated display makes it more likely to take a text out of its context. I have already shown how Pastor Kong appropriates biblical verses and recontextualises them for present use and this has somewhat fed into the vocabulary of his ex-members as they confessed his "guilt" online.

At work here is also the forced immediacy of new media software. Such software immediately prompts its user a message, such as a notification pop-up when a message is posted, a 'like' is made, or when the pastor sends a daily devotion email to a church member's inbox.
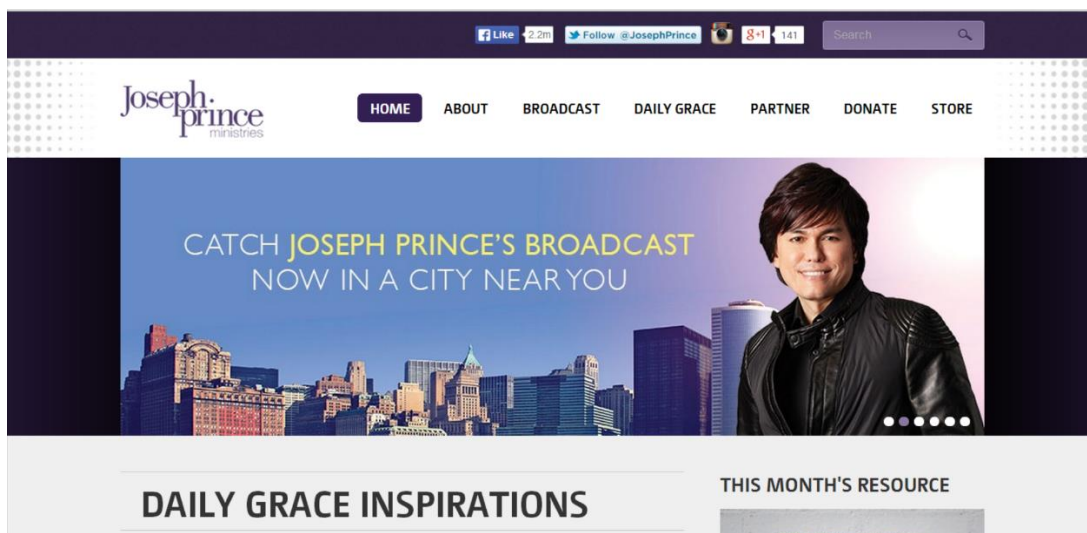

FIG. 67. Landing page of www.josephprince.org and photograph of Pastor Joseph Prince.
Source: Screenshot retrieved from http://www.josephprince.org/ on June 9, 2014.

FIG. 68. About "Our Senior Pastors", Photograph of "Apostle Lawrence Khong and Rev (Dr) Nina Khong.
Source: Screenshot retrieved from http://www.fcbc.org.sg/about/senior-pastors on May 22, 2014.

The creation of a new use is possible only by deactivating an old, rendering it inoperative (Agamben 2007 86).

Biblical messages are recreated for a new use in a new environment. It may seem that the old use of the Bible is deactivated but to be more precise, messages only seem to be inoperative when used by "spectacular religion" (Agamben 2007, 88). When pastors choose to obscure a text in favour of one that fits their messages, there can also be others who recode and re-present those messages in the sphere of the media and counteract the spectacular religion.

FIG. 69. Lawrence Khong reframed as an "Anti-Gay Crusader." The image of
him being shackled is used as an ironic rebuke in his "pro-family" campaign,
which is aimed at condemning the LGBT activism in Singapore.
Source: Retrieved from
http://therealsingapore.com/sites/default/files/field/image/lawrence-khong.jpg on
July 13, 2014.

The play in new media redirects the experience of the word in more ways than one. The

question for me is not whether profanation can still occur or whether there are still any "pure

means" for language and religion to disclose new means of use or communication. In my

opinion, there was never any "pure" means. Considering Twitter messages as translation, that

is, by recoding words on a page to digital (HTML) codes to page on your computer screen,

the sacred text (the Bible) is "the event of a *pas de sens*, a step of meaning/no meaning"

(Derrida 2007a, 224). The *Pas-de-sens*, Derrida explains, "does not signify poverty of

meaning but no meaning that would be itself, meaning, beyond any "literality." And right

there is the sacred." The sacred, Derrida further writes, "surrenders itself to translation, which

devotes itself to the sacred" and the "sacred would be nothing without translation, and

translation [*Ü bersetzung*, which can also mean transmission in German] would not take place

without the sacred [*lui*]; the one and the other are inseparable" (Derrida 2007a, 224). The

Twitter quotes on the pastors' walls and profiles say nothing that make sense beyond the

event itself—but the event is precisely the beyond, the post event that melds with the event—and transmits the message in a language not our own and between the lines (the coding). The quote translates itself of itself into a short passage (150 characters on the Twitter platform), and it is in this self-relation (the pastor quotes the translator or transmitter of quotes from the Bible) that the task of the translator finds itself engaged (Derrida 2007a, 224). Here, I must quote Derrida quoting Maurice de Gandillac:

> For, to some degree, all the great writings, but to the highest point holy Scripture, contain between the lines their virtual translation. The interlinear version of the sacred text is the model or ideal of all translation. (Derrida 2007a, 225)

This, I argue, furthers Agamben's argument that profanation is neutralized by new media, because embedded into a sacred text is its potential to create new meaning. It "translates itself of itself," and cannot exclude, as Derrida points out, "gradations, virtuality, interval, and in-between, the infinite labor to rejoin that which is nevertheless past, already given, right here, between the lines, already signed" (Derrida 2007a, 224-225). The signature of the pastor on his websites and new media platform perform simultaneously his signature and his translator's task, but also the conflicts and historical developments of translation, interpretation, transmission, and concealment of the Bible. The pastor-preacher competes with and includes himself in relation to many others before him and many others who will come after him. From pulpit to pulpit, the sacred text is each time deconstructed at every turn, twists and turns, during revivals and declines. But the name of God cannot be professed so vainly and without consequence. What is at stake now is that the process of 'gradations, virtuality, interval, and in-between, the infinite labor to rejoin…' is relocated to a site of automation. The pastor may sign his name on the Twitter account, but this signature is digital; the signature along with its marks are translated by the machine's preloaded fonts and

transmitted to somewhere else, appearing again on screens and browsers. The sacred text now competes or negotiates with the digital text. When Derrida writes that "the event melds completely with the act of language…" and "since no meaning lets itself be detached, transferred, transported, or translated into another tongue as such (as meaning), it commands right away the translation that it seems to refuse…It [the absolute text of the Bible] is translatable and untransferable" (Derrida 2007a, 224), he is perhaps hinting at the deconstruction of the tower of Babel.

The force of web-programming automation, however, virtually recreates a figurative tower of text as you scroll up and down almost endlessly. A web platform like Twitter transfers the translation and the translatability of the biblical text to this tower. In other words, Twitter finds new events that let the text meld itself with. The events no longer form linearly, but can be spread through a net of sharing and digital transfer (such as the use of hashtags on Twitter). It is not that the text becomes less sacred, but the translatability of the sacredness is now transferable.

FIG. 70. A confession on June 9, 2014 where an ex-member of CHC and shares a verse from Colossian 3:12-14.
Source: Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/CHCConfessions?fref=nf on June 9, 2014.

There is a consequence of this transfer of the sacred text. The church as a whole is not unified. It cannot be because of the interlinearity and the *pas-de-sens* of the sacred text. The paradox is that the more churches and Christians make the digital turn and reperform their sermons, messages, profiles and signatures online, the more they reveal their differences and thus the disunity of their Gospel messages. On one hand, digital technology allows connections to form and interactions to happen. On the other hand, the interactions must include attacks, disagreements and misrepresentations of the church's message, even though the evangelical intentions behind any incorporation of digital technology are the same for different churches. No analysis of Christianity in Singapore can be adequate without a more thorough discussion of the conflicts of being messengers of God and gods, even the anonymous ones.

Chapter 7

#ECCESS

I type, therefore, of a code.

Of a six-character code, I type, therefore, of the character a substituted by "e" to form a slight variation to what is an already defined word: *access*. It erases the original but in place of it is, to echo the HTML colour codes, a shade of the previous reference. Not quite a homophone (there is still a difference), it is a recoding of the previous code. It signals the previous code, by retaining five out of six of the characters.

In HTML colour coding, a change in only one character marks a slight change in the intensity of one of the three colours: Red, Green and Blue (RGB). By recoding and changing the letter, I introduce a slight change in intensity or shade. Nevertheless, the retyping is a significant change to the code. But visually, the shade can only be seen if the monitor can show the slight difference; dark among white.

Thus, even if one passes over the colour shades, due to colour blindness or the old version of a monitor screen not being able to capture the subtle difference, a change is registered by the substitution of a character to the code. A visual imprint of this graphic intervention is thus made:

<div align="center">

ECCESS

</div>

Eccess is a code for: access made possible by excess. It also signals other possible contact points: IP addresses, nodes, cables, waves, passwords. It may mean to have excess in anticipation of access; a ton of passwords to gain access to one portal or multiple physical cables to give the illusion of a straight path through a single hyperlink. Or it can mean to have too much access that it becomes excessive, such as the multiple accounts one can sign up to on Twitter. It also echoes the parallel characters in HTML colour codes: CC and SS. *Eccess*

still retains very closely the original word, access. By substituting x for c, it repeats the c that comes after. At the same time, it highlights the repetitions in the word formation: CC and SS; as if excessively written, rendering it less intelligible as a word, it nevertheless proves useful in the following discussion of trace, effacement and imprintment:

> The word sheaf seems to mark more appropriately that the assemblage to be proposed has the complex structure of a weaving, an interlacing which permits the different threads and different lines of meaning—or of force—to go off again in different directions, just as it is always ready to tie itself up with others. (Derrida 1982a, 3)

The thesis dissertation aims to address those threads and lines of force that go in different directions (data dissemination) and tie up with others (interfaces). It is an update of Derrida's seminal "Différance" (and masks my simple resistance to my Word Processor innate coding to instantaneously correct "Différance" into "Difference"). Through the code, it hints at the complex process of reproducing religious practices into digital forms. It conveys and reminds us that there are more ways than one to write a word, speak, present or recode a word. A code is also a medium. It is a medium that codes and recodes messages—numbers, letters, symbols and marks.

It may be objected that the coded and recoded language vanishes into the background. It is to be certain recallable but the full programming style-sheet is obscured and we must let ourselves encounter an interface of forms, icons, text and images in order to witness its vanishing. From this point of view, the marked difference in "eccess" is forcefully affiliated with two places: the face by which you see the difference in codes and those same codes that make possible an illusion of seeing this new word. One can expose only to a certain extent how "eccess" is not quite a word, but nonetheless become present, manifest, that which can

be shown, presented as something present… that much is repeated but where else can we go from here?

Eccess can still be a word. To gain access through excess, that much is implied in the formation of the word. It suggests that the more you have, the higher the chance to have access; a plurality of means and possibilities to connect. It can be about multiplication and codes doubly presented with a change of two characters instead of one. It also situates itself in the world of programming language. However, it is also less than that: it is, as it were, a medium by which meaning can try to take root but will inevitably give way to something else or to another meaning. It patches itself. It recodes itself. It fails, but somewhere along the way, reformats itself in a patchwork of epiphanies only to be consumed by the next system (of language, of machines and of chips).

I am obliged to take the same path Derrida took to reach the question of the "alliance of speech and Being in the unique word" (Derrida 1982a, 27). However, signifying it is not equivalent to indicating the debt to the concept; the signifying would be insignificant. On the contrary, signifying the debt to *différance* will only indicate the veiling of the unveiled understood idea. It is not really about différance.

Instead, the dissertation is really about **ethics**, located in the illusionary devices that come between us, between the face to face, and how we conduct ourselves in the face of spiritual beings. The face…

> …is abstract. This abstraction certainly does not correspond to the raw sensible given of the empiricists. Nor is it an instantaneous cut in time, where time would cross eternity (or where transcendence refuses immanence). The instant pertains to the world; it is a cut that does not bleed… Its abstraction is not obtained from a logical process going from the substance of beings, from the particular to the general. On the contrary, it goes toward being but is not engaged with them, retires from them, is ab-solved…Its wonder lies in the elsewhere whence it comes and where it already retires. But this coming from *elsewhere* is not a symbolic reference to this elsewhere as to a term. (Levinas 2006, 39):

#ECCESS

If the significance of the code above consists in signifying without making appear, if it establishes a relation that does not unveil, if consequently as Levinas argues, "the trace does not belong to phenomenology, to comprehension of appearance and dissimulation, it could at least be approached by another path, by situating that significance from the phenomenology it interrupts" (Levinas 2006, 44). ECCESS is a trace of sorts, which is designed in the imprint left by the one who wanted to erase the traces of CSS (Cascading Style Sheets). Everything lines up in order in a place where each thing reveals the other in another place but it must necessarily be near the other. The place of ECCESS interrupts the site of its manifestation even as it imprints it.

In addition to what ECCESS signifies, it is "the past of the one who delivered the sign" (Levinas 2006, 42). "The significance of the trace is parallel to the significance of the sign sent as communication. The sign stands in that trace." Any significance in ECCESS would depend on how much weight or specific significance is placed on the trace of it. It is not by its simple presence that ECCESS signifies what it is or what it is not. It is more to do with what it does.

The CC and SS of ECCESS mark the movement of the unfolding of others tie up to one another. ECCESS makes possible the face to face.

"Tie Itself Up With Others"

The constitution of the religious practices described in the preceding chapters progressed neither by self-constitution nor divine miracles. They progressed by traces relating to one another; by the face to face (the face is not necessarily human). They progressed by transforming "the ties with the inaccessible" (Nancy 2008a, 8). Re-working Jean Luc Nancy's observation of Western metaphysics it can also be said that Taoist practices and

Christianity in Singapore took shape and functioned by building their ties with traces, whichever one has eccess to. Similar to Western Christianity, their overall relation to the world is shaped by a precise management of eccess and concealment in thought, knowledge and performance, sometimes even giving eccess to excessive information. Indeed, "there was no reduction of the unknown" (Nancy 2008a, 8) for those observed religions. The reason for this, I believe, is the religious practices' capability to produce eccess (to borrow Bataille's concept of general economy), often in the form of performance—such as the trance during spirit possession or the technological-driven public display of their faiths. What they are performing is the unknown, which, because it is difficult to define, is capable of endlessly generating eccessive information. How this flow of information passes down through mediums and is changed by it alters religion and our relationship with it.

By beginning and ending the thesis with individuals who are capable of building "the ties of the inaccessible" I have shown how traces appear in actors, agents, mediums, media, religious objects, and etc., and how they provide the means for practices to flourish and expand, for communications to happen (or not), and for practices to break away from traditions and conventions. These "individuals" do not appear alone but are all tied to the resources and traces that mediate their appearances in diverse worlds—virtual, spiritual and human.

Nancy is right to say that "… the world becomes simultaneously worldwide and resolutely worldly …" but I should also add and clarify: there is no clear transcendental world that a Taoist spirit medium cannot reach out to nor is there ever a history of the "Death of God" to Pentecostal Christians in Singapore. Their expansion must not be understood as a "collaboration and confrontation of 'reason' and 'faith'" (Nancy 2008a, 8) but in terms of the movements of actors, images, symbols, and the eccesses and traces they produce. Before eccess to a religious practice is given to anyone, whether it is an ethnographer or a

worshipper, a paper boat or a visiting god, everyone is already caught in "waves, undulations, single particles." Religious activity "links the innumerable elements which constitute you to the intense communication of these elements among themselves" (Bataille 1988, 93-94). Further, polarities of sacred and secular exist as discourse, but phenomenologically speaking, they co-relate in the everyday as profanities, where popular religions constantly reinvent themselves with new media.

Mediums and media set the stage for the encounters with the traces of their gods; the wholly others of human existence. The formal purpose of this dissertation is to make sense of those encounters through the emphasis on mediums and media. The medium is a trace, not because it disappears, but it marks itself as present. The lure of the trace is that it promises the disappeared signified (may it be god, spirit or idea) even as it disguises it. The face to face of the medium and the Other stands to be "an empirical passage...," beyond the eccess it may become, it "preserves the specific significance of the trace, is possible only by its situation in the trace of this" (Levinas 2006, 43) eccess. When one experiences the epiphany of the mediated Spirit/God/Other, he or she experiences eccess, first and foremost. The epiphany is a manifestation of eccess.

Messengers of Religion

The survey of popular Taoist and Protestant practices in Singapore and their comparison provides an entry into the complex matter of mediation and mediumship. No doubt the focus on the island state cannot indicate all variations of similar religious practices but the concepts and topics of religion and performance are not unique to the geographical area. I have specifically chosen the intersections between religion, spirituality and digital media to investigate the ramifications of religion mediated by digital technology, which I have shown to define contemporary manifestations of religion. The present dissertation

contributes to the theorising of digital media and its impact on religious and spiritual expression. Indeed, the concepts of medium and mediation are translatable to other contexts beyond religion and ritual.

My title, "Messengers of Religion" is straightforward. It means all forms and shapes of message carriers and makers of religion. Messengers include the artificial ones, the naturally occurring ones, and those that are a bit of both. When radio waves, for example, transmit and move, a message is transported. When a message is transported, another circuit is potentially made.

I started out my thesis with the basic question: **how do mediums and media make religion work?** While I may have answered that question for a selection of religious contexts, and each context presents its unique features, one observation remains constant for all cases: a medium is necessary and always available to perform. A medium's function predicates on its capacity to perform. In other words, it makes known or present the mediated; it makes the immaterial material, the imperceptible perceptible, or an example exemplary. My definition of mediation excludes the inherited connotation of imitation as mere representation and fake. Instead, it emphasises on the speed at which meaning can be formed and reconstituted through mediation. It highlights the performativity of mediums as messengers in disseminating messages, being as traces, and making new performances.

Medium[18]

Not Marshall McLuhan's "The medium is the message," but a new formula: "The medium is the maker."

(Miller 2009, 1)

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[18] A first version of the above section, "Medium" is published in *Ecumenica: Journal of Theatre and Performance* 7(1) and 7(2), Special Issue on Critical Terms in Religion, Spirituality, and Performance: 49-52.

McLuhan tells us that the "medium is the massage." Joseph Hillis Miller, however, corrects the word "massage" to "message." Although a typographical error and a pun to mean both 'message' and 'mass-age,' it hints at the ambiguous meaning of 'medium' and the tussle for its meaning.

'Medium' encompasses a potentially infinite number of message makers and mass media, old and new. It also includes, perhaps unintentionally, the corrective and even misfiring inventory of effects a medium may have on the content it carries. To think of medium is, I concede, to think of translation and mistranslation.

The Latin word Medium can be translated into the English word 'middle,' which also conveys the following meanings: a channel for communication, a size designation or how cooked meat is. The expression, Medium, can be seen as a "password," to borrow Baudrillard's conceptual expression (Baudrillard 2003, xiii), in order to initiate ways of getting inside things and describing how they work. With this password, what eludes human understanding—spirits, dreams, ghosts, gods, and waves—can be realised into material entities and be translated into useful information that can be studied or even manipulated. From this "password," I can derive the term 'spirit-medium,' commonly used to refer to shamans, medicine men and women—humans with the agency to communicate with spiritual beings or act as a "'bridge' between the 'spirit world' and the world of the living" (Morris 2006, 17-18).

It is also a word that brings to the fore what is to me a twice removed language—when one reads the Latin word *Medium* appearing in Morris's text, the word is always in the middle of something—it is a trace that remains untranslatable or resists translation. This can be seen in the way the word Medium is used, with some awareness that some form of spiritual connection is being established or that the imperceptible is made perceptible.

A middle ground is established: as long as a medium is available a spirit can make its appearance. God, or a god, gains meaning, whether in excess or in deficit; the middle place of presence is a scary place to be in and without a password, there is no 'bridge' or access to the other side.

I would like to dwell on Miller's definition of 'medium' to further analyse what this password means: "But 'maker' also implies a performative force. The medium itself makes something happen" and according to Derrida, this happening occurs "without reference to the message the medium carries" (Miller 2009, 1). By attributing a medium as a maker and performative force, it gains a certain impetus to perform, to make happen as it were, even if it is perceived as a lie, a fake or a complete enigma. This can be connected to Theodor W. Adorno's theory that performance is to be the medium of "sentimentality," which he describes as the "longing of people for feigning things" (Adorno 2001, 534). "People," he writes, "expect a performance rather than the presentation of the genuine." Hence, 'performance,' whether accurate or not, gets lobbied around as false, less than real, a means of enjoyment, and a form of imitation.

Adorno's prejudiced understanding of 'performance' and media (which have been re-described as devices of a religious medium) ironically highlights Martin Luther Thomas's pragmatic ways of bringing about evangelical success. Adorno's detailed description and block quotations of the radio evangelist's strategies and mechanics of engaging with the medium, id est, performances, whether genuine or not, highlights how "a medium makes something happen." Even Adorno concedes that "personal shortcomings [of Thomas' speeches and Hitler's uncensored speeches] fit marvelously with public demands" (Adorno 2001, 534-535).

Similarly, some religious practices use a massive number of mediums and they are available to "make things happen." Popular Taoist practices have talismans for healing,

tokens to hold magical powers, icons and statues to substitute deities, palanquins and chairs to carry objects and humans possessed by gods, all of which are re-mediated and digitalized into online streaming media (YouTube and smartphone videos).

Would Adorno's actor— "a man who can pretend well, can disguise himself, and impersonate others" (Adorno 2001, 534)— be applicable to a modern Taoist spirit medium who performs a deity possessing him or her regularly and also has access to an inventory of media and technologies? To answer that question, I propose to place Miller's "a medium is the maker" alongside Samuel Weber's notion of theatricality as a medium.

Miller repositions 'medium' in the middle of signification. To him, the making of gods, spirits and ghosts via mediums is equally a reverse process.

> To get through from 'the other side', the spirits need tables to turn, or slates to write on, or writing paper, or the medium's body, or his or her hands or voice-box, or ectoplasm recorded on a photographic plate, or a ouija board. With all forms of telepathy, traditional, modern, or postmodern, it is always a question of transferring spirit to some form of matter that can then be read as comprehensible signs and turned back into spirit, that is, 'meaning'. (Miller 2009, 11)

He further draws from Jacques Derrida's concept of archivization— producing "as much as it records the event" to emphasize the performative efficacy of the medium itself (Miller 2009, 25).

The idea of the medium as the maker of spirituality cannot be easily reduced to a fake or mere representation. A medium is more than an Adorno's 'actor.' The process of signifying spirituality through a medium, such as in the case of popular Taoist practices where deities supposedly descend onto men, always "leaves something out or something over" (S. Weber 2004, x). When speaking about theatricality as resisting "the reduction of meaningful narrative by virtue of its ability to signify," Weber addresses the allegorical dimension of theatricality and associates it with language: theatricality or being theatrical

(such as acting as gods) is significant. Indeed, the process of signifying is both an "excess and deficit" (S. Weber 2004, x).

Perhaps *Medium* is an appropriate word to describe the betwixt and between, the deficit (a medium is not quite the spirit itself) brought about by mediation and having an eccess of mediums performing. But is *Medium* Latin or English? Do the gods need mediums as much as we humans need them to express all things spiritual? As humans perform to gods through mediums, are the gods also performing to us? Each religious practice has its theatre and thus theatricality as its medium—what remains is the performative efficacy of the medium. For Taoist popular practices, the spirit-medium figure is often referred to as Ji Tong (乩童), loosely translated as 'Divination-child.' These need not be young but the connotation of being a 'child' suggests the playful and innocent nature of the spiritual performances and the relationship between the deity and his or her child. A culturally specific term overwrites the general usage and describes how the deity performs when possessing the child—they hardly form complete sentences and instead perform more physical actions.

When a medium appears, it draws attention to the middle place where the unknown and known supposedly meet and produces the event, its signs, miracles, states, and affects. For instance, Zhuangzi and his butterfly, Carlos Castaneda and his crow, and Miller and his correction of McLuhan's 'massage' with a word processor installed to a computer connected to the Internet. We do not quite know what the term 'medium' truly means because of the ambiguity and even disappearance of the source that the medium mediates, and each religious practice has its cultural specificity. Derrida once said (and I quote with the aid of Weber's English translation) that "the appeal of the media is the disappearance of the body…because it has become wine and bread, wafer, spiritualized blood and body, spectralized, virtualized, sanctified, and consumable" (Derrida 2001, 92). On the one hand, we are and have always been dependent on mediums to denote the reality that we are living in and the diverse theatres

we enact. On the other hand, those mediums could also make spirits speak, perform and act without confirming their status as spirit or body. In fact, the latest forms of mediation, the digital media, suspend that status and convert spirituality to plural formats that are neither physical nor spiritual. That is, I think, the carnal temptation of the medium: it can tempt the spirit to be a body and vice versa. Then, eccess remains.
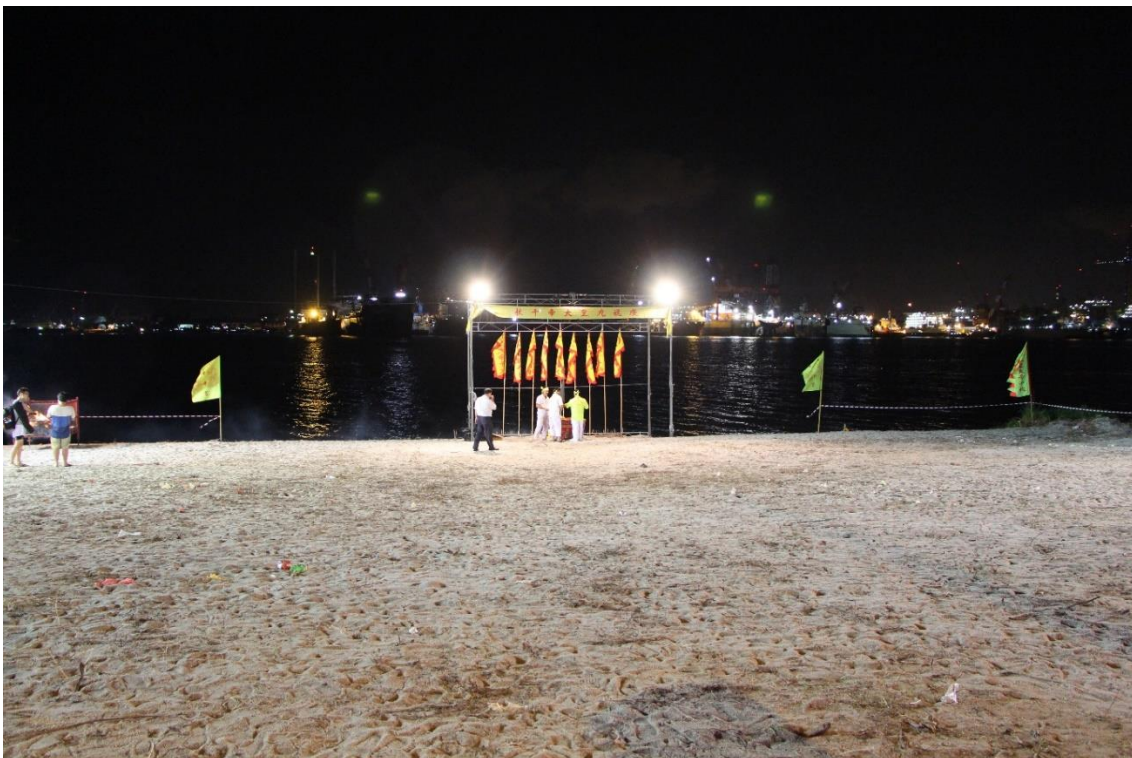
Last Words

FIG. 71. Tuas, Singapore.
Image: Alvin Lim.

The above image shows me behind the camera, after a long procession of spirit mediums inviting their gods from the sea. The footprints on the sand are vivid, traces of people once gathering, standing, and moving. The men at the distance are too far away from me to make sense of their actions. Against a backdrop of the industrial heart of Singapore, they stand, they stood and I left.

One may be more accustomed to the images of intense ritualistic practices: spirits assailing the bodies of devotees, blood gushing out of wounds made by spikes, swords and daggers, priests and pastors rallying members of Christ in an acted cannibalistic theatre. However, it is often the quiet reflection after a prolonged and intense experience that allows us to take stock of our past, our instincts, and our recollections. The moments dissipate, the gods disappear, and they leave behind footprints, traces, and memories that we can no longer quite differentiate in terms of where they come from and whom they belong to.

This, I believe, expresses our humanity. Traces promise the perseverance of our practices and expressions, but they also foreground our vulnerability and tell of our reliance on others: they are here; they will soon be gone.

Every time I visit a procession, I witness and participate in a relentless archiving of the practice. While I may not (and cannot) believe the Taoist gods, there is still the belief of the labour, the intensity and the poignancy of people deeply rooted in their practice. There is a collective experience beyond just the moment of spiritual re-enactment, and of a shared and fragmented history. I am desperate to uncover the surface of things, of origins and originals, but to no avail, I can only speak of their traces. Archiving is one of the ways of expressing this contradiction between preservation and loss.

That is enough: the worlds as we experience begin to hide as they appear, disappear as they come to the fore. At every instant, religious practices perform our entangled relations with the worlds. Born with an ignorance of our worlds, we create religious practices to perhaps connect with something or somewhere beyond ourselves. They are also the opportunity for us to be rooted and belong to a vast universe, within the confines of our lived environment. There is no end to our finitude.

What does it mean to be religious? I believe it means to be human, to pretend that we know but we do not, to be firm when we are weak, and to be vulnerable when we are lost. We

are affirmed of our mortality; are assured of our immortality—even if it means losing our bodies and remaining as traces and memories. There is always an afterlife, a post-event, a later immortality meant for something else to mediate. We are not immortals. We are mortals for the immortals.

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