The Transmission of Information in Chinese Folk Religion: Reflections on Fieldwork in Putian, Fujian*

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Abstract
In folk religion, the key to interaction among gods, ghosts, and people lies in the transmission of information. The separation between the spheres of yin and yang leads to an asymmetry of information and the need for communication. The transmission of information between ghosts and the living displays a differential mode of association in interpersonal relations. Two important means for this transmission are block divination and the spirit mediums known as tongji. The choice determines the mode of interaction between humans and spirits, the specific role played by gods, and the type of information they provide. That information may be called “sacred knowledge,” which contrasts with ordinary social knowledge in the characteristics, mechanisms, and rules regarding its transmission.

Keywords
folk religion, gods, ghosts, the living, differential mode of association, spirit mediums, sacred knowledge

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Among the diverse religious activities in China’s vast countryside, most center on the interaction between gods, ghosts, and living people: ghosts haunting the living, the living praying to gods, gods giving advice to the living, exorcisms, and so on. This interaction is a part of everyday life for rural believers, in whose communities gods and ghosts are also members. Ghosts carry memories of the community’s past, while gods examine that past to interpret the present and predict the future, interacting with living people in a synchronic community. In this community, human members must bear responsibility for their actions in both this life and in previous lives, as well as for the actions of their ancestors. In the seemingly benighted everyday lives of believers, then, their living space is actually far more expansive than that of so-called civilized people governed by modernity.

In synchronic communities of interaction among gods, ghosts, and living people, “interaction” actually consists of transmitting gods’ advice and ghosts’ demands via spirit mediums, on which basis the living then undertake appropriate votive or apotropaic actions. This transmission of information is the core of folk religion.

This article consists of some rather conceptual reflections on field research I have conducted for many years in Putian, Fujian, where folk religion is particularly developed.

**The Need for Information across the Spheres of Yin and Yang**

Ten years—dead and living dim and draw apart  
I don’t try to remember  
but forgetting is hard.

Lonely grave a thousand miles off  
cold thoughts—where can I talk them out?  
Even if we met you wouldn’t know me,  
dust on my face,  
hair like frost—

In a dream last night suddenly I was home.  
By the window of the little room  
you were combing your hair and making up.  
You turned and looked, not speaking,  
only lines of tears coursing down—  
year after year will it break my heart?

The moonlit grave,  
its stubby pines—

Su Shi, “River City: A Dream”
In this eleventh-century poem, Su Shi’s grief for his deceased wife derives from the eternal separation between Heaven and the living, including the cutting off of communication. In folk religion, death signifies departure from the yang world of living people and entrance into the yin world in another form of existence. There is a strict boundary and separation between the spheres of yin and yang that cannot be casually traversed (Li, 2004: 55). The living and the dead cannot directly communicate with one another; otherwise how could there be a “distinction between the living and the dead”? It is this separation that obstructs communication between the two spheres and creates the great demand for information.

This demand can be divided into two types: one concerns affection or longing for the deceased (as in Su Shi’s longing for his deceased wife), and the other concerns “solving problems and resolving uncertainties” 解惑.

The demand for information concerning affection refers to the desire of living people to communicate with their deceased loved ones in the netherworld. The purpose of such communication is the temporary emotional satisfaction of the living. When someone dies, the family “performs the seven” 做七 for them, with seven sets of seven days of memorial, forty-nine in all, from “the first seven” to “the last seven.” “The first seven” welcomes the soul 魂 of the deceased family member into the home, whereas the “last seven” requires the preparation of a large amount of spirit money and papier-mâché sedan chairs, horses, and even modern household appliances such as TV sets, cell phones, washing machines, gas stoves, sofas, apartments, and cars as offerings to the deceased. After the ritual of reciting scripture is completed, the aforementioned papier-mâché items are burned. The living are usually eager to find out details about how their loved ones are doing in the netherworld as soon as “the last seven” days are completed.

As I have discussed elsewhere, in Putian, for example, where folk religion is particularly developed, information concerning affection for the deceased is acquired through a special approach known as “beseeching the bagu 八龟 spirit (a term transliterated from the Putian dialect). The procedure starts with the seeker of information burning incense to “summon the spirit,” quietly enunciating the object of inquiry, and then sitting down nearby to wait. It is said that the bagu who has possessed a tongji 童乩 medium sends a thyalingyue 舍人仔 spirit (another Putian term) to the yin realm to search for the soul of the deceased relative. On finding the soul, the thyalingyue tells the bagu information about it, and the bagu will shout “new death” (the soul of someone who died recently), “old death” (someone who died over three years ago), “a red flower” (meaning the deceased had a daughter) or “two white flowers” (if the deceased had two sons). The inquirer uses this information to determine if the right soul has been found (Wu, 2017: 86).
If so, the inquirer steps forward to ask about the specific situation of the deceased loved one in the afterlife. The tongji possessed by the bagu often weeps and sings. If what is said corresponds to reality (for example, how old the person was when he or she died, how the person died, who in the family is still living), then any relatives present will join in the weeping, having confirmed that their dearly departed is now right before their eyes. They usually ask whether the deceased received the burial clothes 寿衣 and the various offerings burned during “the last seven” or if they were stolen by wild ghosts, what the deceased is doing in the netherworld, how the conditions are, whether his or her yin home (i.e., the grave) is warm enough, and so. This period of interaction between the spheres of yin and yang is limited, often to about half an hour. When the soul of the deceased is ready to leave, the inquiring relative will firmly grasp the hand of the tongji, the observers all brimming with emotion. This tearful process of interaction between yin and yang is often audio-recorded by relatives in attendance, who later play it for other family members in order to allay their grief.

The demand for information aimed at solving problems arises when family members encounter illness or some other misfortune and require advice from the gods about how to deal with it. Such information is mainly applied to urgent matters or personal pain, and so believers are often more willing to pay money or invest time in order to obtain it than for information concerning affection. Because of the relative lack of medical resources and the low accessibility of health services in the countryside, villagers often fail to receive treatment in a timely manner, with the result that minor illnesses can develop into serious ones, acute diseases become chronic ones, and simple conditions become complex ones difficult to diagnose. At that point, even if one goes to the doctor and asks for medicine, there is no clear and effective treatment. After experiencing the Mao era’s campaign to “shift the focus of healthcare work to the countryside,” ordinary villagers actually hold science and medicine in great esteem, and their psychological expectation is that “the illness departs when the medicine arrives.” As soon as someone encounters a situation where medicine does not cure the illness, then they or their relatives will suspect interference by a ghost. Villagers’ strategy for dealing with persistent illness is to consult “both the doctor and the bodhisattva [i.e., gods],” that is, science belongs to science and belief belongs to belief; when you need to consult a doctor, consult a doctor, and when you need to consult a god, consult a god. Most believers who consult gods for advice do so out of concern with long-term illnesses that have been unresponsive to other treatments. Another scenario is when a family has been down on their luck, for example when they have repeatedly lost money in business, or when they have encountered a string of misfortunes such as workplace injuries, automobile accidents, or failure in marriage or childbirth. “Why is everyone else doing better
“Wu than me?” is the question tormenting believers eagerly seeking the gods’ advice. In general, this advice consists of information that the living cannot obtain through their own experience in the yang world. For example, the gods offer information about previous lives, such as qianyuan 前缘, when two people were married in a previous life, but now one is married to someone else in the yang world while the other, still a spirit in the yin world, comes to seek remarriage with the former spouse (known as hejin 合卺), thus causing them to repeatedly fall ill. Or mengyuan 蒙冤, when someone dies wrongfully and their ghost comes to haunt the descendants of the person who wronged them. Or “begging for food” 讨食, when a family forgets to make offerings to ancestors from several generations prior (known as “top generations of ancestors” 顶代公妈), inducing their ghosts to come requesting food (“a bite of food” 一嘴食). Or fanchong 犯冲, when a child or a woman (women are often regarded as unclean because of menstruation) accidentally fails to step away from the path of a god, who then becomes angry or his horse’s hooves or even tail knocks them over. All these scenarios make believers fearful of life’s unpredictability and riskiness. With regard to the gods’ provision of information concerned with solving problems, then, believers adopt the pious attitude of “It’s better to believe it exists than to believe it doesn’t exist.” Moreover, even if a person has doubts about the gods’ information concerned with solving problems, such doubts are impossible to substantiate through lived experience.

It can thus be seen that the demand for both types of information results from the asymmetry between gods, ghosts, and humans with regard to information. The information conveyed by ghosts is that which living humans cannot access, such as the emotional entanglements of past lives or the wrongs committed by one’s ancestors. The information accessible by the living is superficial and limited to the present. Although they know that “wrongs have a source and debts have a debtor,” the living cannot trace things back to previous lives or ancestors if they depend only on their superficial grasp of information. Gods, however, can cross the boundary between yin and yang. No matter how sneaky a ghost’s tricks may be, it cannot evade the torch-like gaze of the gods, not to mention the gods’ ability to predict the future and warn humans to take appropriate measures for protecting themselves. Gods belong to a super-temporal existence, with much longer memories and much more complete information than ghosts (who may be able to remember back no further than their most recent life). It could be said that the asymmetry of information constitutes a hierarchy of power. Since gods have the most complete information, they play the most powerful role in the relationship between ghosts and gods. Humans’ fear of ghosts derives from the former’s ignorance, their inability to understand the affairs of past lives or ancestors, their inability to take responsibility for their own past lives or ancestors, and thus their inability to avoid being haunted
by ghosts. Humans’ respect for gods and the reason for seeking them out is to acquire scarce informational resources and decrease uncertainties. The acquisition of information, that is, the decrease of uncertainly, is a major accomplishment for humans in this world (Arrow, 1989: 70–71). Strictly speaking, gods cannot ensure that humans will get rich and live well, but they can provide methods for dealing with harassment by ghosts and precautions against their harm to humans’ fortunes.

The Differential Mode of Association in the Transmission of Information

Fei Xiaotong proposed the concept of *chaxugeju* 差序格局 (conventionally translated as “the differential mode of association”) to reveal the structural and behavioral characteristics of rural society in China (Fei, 1998: 30). In this mode, interaction emphasizes kinship, or how close or distant the relationship is. *Cha* 差 (“different” or “lower”) can be understood as the degree of emotional investment, which is directly proportional to the closeness of the relationship: the closer it is, the greater the agent’s emotional investment; the lighter the investment, the lower one’s position is in the structure. *Xu* 序, or “sequence,” refers to the degree of urgency in an agent’s emotional investment, which is also directly proportional to the closeness of the relationship: the closer it is, the more urgent the agent’s emotional investment, and the less urgent the investment, the later one’s position is in the sequence. In his explanation of the differential mode of association, Chen Shaoming argues that the reason it is necessary to distinguish between different degrees of emotional investment is that an individual’s time and energy are limited, and hence the only way to make an assessment is to pay attention to *cha* and *xu*: “Individuals without adequate ability or access to resources are unable to act in such a way as to express love,” and “the Confucian social ideal of love also concerns its possibility of practice” (2016: 131–43). This sort of explanation assumes that the agent is a “rational person.” “Rational people” are isolated individuals, not “sociocultural people,” and behavioral science does not support the postulate of “rational self-interest.” For example, mirror neurons are believed to be the physiological basis for moral behavior such as empathy and putting yourself in someone else’s shoes. If we assume agents to be sociocultural people, then the reason their emotional investment requires distinction according to degree may be their empathy: the closer one is to someone, the greater one’s ability to feel their pain, and thus the greater one’s willingness to help shoulder their burden (Chen Lisheng, 2016). In the differential mode of association, then, agents’ behavioral traits are essentially based on kinship ties of empathy and compassion.
What Fei Xiaotong’s concept of the differential mode of association explains are the behavioral traits of rural Chinese society. As described at the beginning of this article, ghosts and gods actually belong as special members to the same “synchronic community” as living humans. In this community, interaction among these three types of beings also follows the principles of the differential mode of association, as manifested in the way ghosts transmit information to the living.

After one dies, if one’s soul receives offerings from family members or descendants, it is not regarded as a “ghost.” In the eyes of believers, ghosts are souls that do not receive regular offerings from descendants—even the souls of one’s own ancestors. The following scenarios may prevent souls of the deceased from regularly receiving offerings from their descendants. First are those with living descendants who fail to make offerings. Sometimes because they are separated by too many generations, descendants forget that their distant ancestors exist and so do not make offerings, or they forget their ancestors’ birthdays or memorial days and so fail to make offerings at the right time. These ancestors’ souls then come “begging for food” from their descendants, requesting or intimating that they should start making offerings regularly. The latter refer to such ancestors somewhat scornfully as “ancestral ghosts” 公妈鬼. A second scenario occurs when descendants are unable to make offerings. If an ancestor dies unnaturally or somewhere away from home, this is referred to as a “dispersed death” 散亡. In popular thinking, one’s soul alights wherever the body dies. Those who suffer dispersed deaths cannot return home but can only wander in the wild, and even if they have descendants, the latter cannot make offerings to them at home. Such souls are thus regarded as “wild ghosts” 野鬼 or “dangerous ghosts” 厉鬼. Whenever a dispersed death takes place, local villagers must get together and conduct an exorcism for three days and nights lest the soul of the deceased remain in the area and cause problems in the future. A third scenario occurs when there are no descendants to make offerings. If a family has no sons, then it is unable to carry on the lineage, and hence there are no descendants to make offerings to the souls of deceased ancestors. These souls thus become wild ghosts. For traditional Chinese people, it is more important to have offspring who can bury their parents and grandparents than to have offspring who can take care of them in their old age. “Among the three offences against filial piety, the worst is failing to have offspring”: this line from Mengzi refers not only to sons who can take care of their parents in old age and bury them, but also to descendants who can make offerings to their ancestors. Families without sons must do whatever they can to solve these problems through emergency measures such as ruzhui 入赘 (having a son-in-law move in with them), guoji 过 继 (adopting a nephew to act as a son), or lianggu 两顾 (having male
descendants make offerings to both their birth parents and their adopted parents or godparents 义父母).

What people call “a haunting” actually refers to situations where souls that do not receive offerings find their descendants, collateral relatives, or unrelated people and transmit strong or weak information expressing the need for offerings. Strong information includes direct harm to the latter by scaring them, possessing them, or causing them to fall ill or their families to encounter misfortune. Weak information includes reminding the latter by appearing to them in dreams or in waking life. The relative strength or weakness of information transmitted is directly related to the ghost’s degree of closeness to the living person in question, displaying a differential mode of association in the transmission of information: with the descendant in the yang realm as the center, the degree of effort to transmit information from ghost to human is directly proportional to the former’s distance from the center. The closer the relationship, the lower the degree of effort, while the more distant the relationship, the greater the effort, to the point of stopping at nothing. As described above, the behavioral traits of agents in the differential mode of association consist essentially of empathy and concern based on bonds of kinship. More closely related spirits, such as souls of the deceased that already receive offerings from their descendants, sometimes appear in dreams to request an increase in the quantity of offerings or a change to the method, time, or place at which they are made, if existing offerings are often stolen by other wild ghosts. Since the “ancestral ghosts” care about their descendants, in order to avoid disturbing them, they transmit only weaker requests by, for example, possessing one and speaking to other family members. When it comes to more distant relationships, on the other hand, ghosts are likely to adopt more threatening measures that may harm the people in question. As for wild ghosts with no bonds of kinship at all, custom precludes them from receiving regular offerings: “Sacrificing to ghosts that are not one’s own is obsequious” says the Analects. If someone is haunted by such a wild ghost, the only solution is to assuage it temporarily with a one-off offering.

In the Tang dynasty text “On the Origins of Ghosts”原鬼, Han Yu wrote that “there is no consistency in ghosts’ interaction with the living”: the former sometimes harm or bring misfortune upon the latter, but sometimes they bring good fortune, and yet other times they do neither. There thus seems to be no rhyme or reason to the ways ghosts relate to people. A ghost may be happy one moment and angry the next. However, the aforementioned differential mode of association displayed in ghosts’ transmission of information to the living could actually be called “consistency in ghosts’ interaction with the living.”
A Medium for the Transmission of Information

A spirit medium is a medium of interaction among gods, ghosts, and living humans. Any channel for conveying information among these three parties may be called a spirit medium. Among such mediums, tongji, who are possessed by gods directly, receive people’s requests and in turn reveal the gods’ advice by speaking in their voices. This is the most direct medium for achieving communication between people and gods and is the most widely accepted by believers in Fujian, Guangdong, and Taiwan. Xie Zhaozhe’s Ming dynasty text “Five Miscellanies” 五杂俎 documented the popularity of wuxi 巫觋 (mediums or shamans) in Fujian and Guangdong at the time: “Wuxi are on the rise south of the Yangzi, especially in Fujian and Guangdong.” In the Qing dynasty, the “Jiangtong” 降童 chapter of Shi Hongbao’s Miscellaneous Records of Fujian 闽杂记 noted: “Jiangtong [literally “going down into a child”] means ‘possession by a god.’ In Fujian this is popularly known as datong 打童 [literally “striking a child”]. This exists in every prefecture but is especially prevalent in the lower prefectures 下府. It is practiced by all wu [mediums, shamans or wizards].” Nowadays in rural Putian (formerly known as Xinghua 兴化 among the premodern “lower prefectures”), a god’s possession of a tongji medium is still called “entering the child” 上童, and the end of a possession is called “withdrawing from the child” 退童. Tongji were originally male, but now that rural society is becoming increasingly hollowed out, most tongji are middle-aged and older women. This is because, in the contemporary demographic composition throughout most of the year, the great majority of people living in the countryside are female. A second reason is that housewives are the main people responsible for matters such as asking gods for guidance. Finally, when people communicate with gods, although tongji serve as spokespeople for the gods, housewives still subconsciously regard them as members of society, so it is more convenient for them to communicate with female tongji—especially when it comes to guidance about women’s private matters (Wu, 2017: 87–91). As Erin M. Cline has pointed out, “they [spirit mediums] provide a religious context in which women’s questions are openly asked and answered,” and “female spirit mediums not only provide women with an opportunity to converse with the gods and directly receive answers and advice but also sympathize with women’s experiences” (Cline, 2010: 547–48).

Another common type of spirit medium is found in “block divination” 卜杯. The “block” refers to a pair of bean-shaped objects made of iron, wood, or bamboo. Each block has a concave side representing yin and a convex side representing yang. During collective rituals or individual requests for guidance from the gods, there is a special person who “throws the blocks” 掷杯,
dropping them about one meter to the ground. If both land with the yin side upwards, that is called “yin blocks,” and if both yang, then “yang blocks.” Each outcome signifies that the god has expressed a different response to the prayer. Yang blocks represent the worst outcome, signifying that the god has expressed a clearly negative attitude with no room for negotiation. If a throw results in yang blocks, the divination stops immediately and cannot resume for the time being. The person who throws the blocks also serves as interpreter and must use conjecture to explain before the people in attendance that the god is reminding us to be more cautious, perhaps because of some unresolved matter or insufficient preparation. If a throw results in one block with the yin side upwards and the other with the yang side upwards, this is called shengbei (literally “sacred blocks”), which signifies that the god might agree with the content of the prayer, but three shengbei in a row are necessary to confirm this. If one or two shengbei are followed by an outcome of yin blocks, the previous throws are invalidated and a new round of divination begins. Practically speaking, the probability of getting three shengbei in a row is slim (Hansen, 1999 [1990]: 62). In other words, the gods do not nod their heads lightly, but this also demonstrates their dignity and the gravity with which they treat the matter.

Tongji and block divination are both common types of mediums, but there are differences between the two regarding the occasion for implementation, the results of communication between people and gods, and human intervention. There is quite an art to choosing which type of medium one should use for which purpose. In most cases concerning personal matters (such as persistent illness, bad luck in the family or with business investment), tongji are consulted as intermediaries for the gods’ guidance, whereas for anything related to public affairs in the rural community (such as the building and maintenance of roads and pathways or decisions related to religious ceremonies for holidays such as Yuanxiao [the Lantern Festival]), block divination is the preferred method.

Since personal matters that require divine guidance all involve private and negative factors, the people involved do not want this information (such as the fact of being harassed by ghosts) known to the public—especially if it concerns business investment. This determines the preference for choosing a tongji. They do not disclose their personal problems until the tongji is possessed by a god, at which moment it is as if there is no longer another person present, thus dispelling any possible misgivings about revealing personal secrets. By contrast, block divination requires the presence of not only the god but also the thrower of the blocks, who may need to ask the people involved some personal questions for the purpose of interpreting the throws,
at which point privacy becomes an issue. Moreover, everyone brings their quandaries with them when consulting the gods, and there is a great sense of urgency regarding the information directly obtained from them, so they hope the gods will provide specific face-to-face guidance—something that cannot be achieved through block divination. Besides, tongji are a sort of private religious business and normally are consulted at their homes, whereas block divination is always performed in public religious spaces. The former is obviously more amenable to the protection of privacy.

By contrast, in basically all matters of public concern, the gods are consulted via block divination. In this sort of communication, gods simply express “yes” or “no” rather than directly giving pointers on human affairs. This makes the distance between people and gods relatively great. After maintaining a certain distance, people can sustain clarity of awareness. As the late Li Yih-yuan of Taiwan’s Academia Sinica once aptly pointed out, “In ‘great tradition’ religions, it is important to maintain distance from gods and to sustain personal clarity of awareness. . . . [They] emphasize the ability to understand textual signs and look down upon trance-like states of direct communication with the deity” (2004: 56). The reason for this, he argued, was that people’s reverence for gods surpassed their sense of intimacy with them. However, Li Anzhai provided a different explanation:

Things such as divination using tortoise shell or straws were for personal use or for use by the rulers. It was not important that they did all they could to use this for frightening the common people; among the latter, it was certainly not permitted to spread falsehoods and delude the masses. According to the “Royal Regulations” [from the Book of Rites], “Those who gave false reports about [appearances of] spirits, about seasons and days, about consultings of the tortoise-shell and stalks, so as to perplex the multitudes: these were put to death.” (Li, 2005: 52)

This is also what Confucius meant by “Sacrifice as if the gods were present” (Analects, Book III, “Ba Yi”) and “Respect the gods and spirits but keep them at a distance” (Book VI, “Yong Ye”). The Confucianism represented by Confucius strongly emphasized the status and agency of humans, making him truly a “spiritual humanist” (Tu, 2011). In this “great tradition,” it was necessary to maintain personal clarity of awareness.

We know that, in the process of block divination, there is a very high chance of throwing either yang blocks or yin blocks, but because the practice often takes place in a ritual setting with many villagers observing, it is extremely important how the thrower interprets the blocks. That is, when a throw results in yang blocks or yin blocks, it is important for the thrower to
seek out a reasonable explanation that the observers can accept. The person
serving as thrower is thus nearly always an authority of the rural community
who is familiar with its affairs, capable of dealing with them and displaying
good sense, and skilled at speaking convincingly (Lin, 2015: 202, 218–19).8
When a throw results in yang blocks, the divination must cease for a moment
while the thrower seeks out possible reasons for the god’s disagreement. For
example, it could be that someone involved with a certain public affair has
failed to deal adequately with public-private relations or caused harm to
another family’s interests. Once the thrower has proposed a possible reason,
the blocks are then used again to ask for instruction, and if the god expresses
approval, the people involved must act accordingly. If the god disapproves,
the thrower must continue to seek out the reason. Block-throwers often say,
“Sometimes the gods let people take the initiative,” meaning that the gods
allow people to make some kind of proposal for the moment, either to make
use of the gods’ authority or to protect their dignity. We can see that in this
process, the god does not speak, making it possible for humans to table new
issues and make use of the occasion to initiate public services such as road
building or conflict resolution for the good of the community. In this process
of “doing religion” (Chau, 2006: 75–76),9 we see that the grassroots practice
of folk religion in rural Chinese society is extremely pragmatic, with a great
deal of human agency. This can be seen as an effort to maintain clarity of
awareness in human relations with the gods, as well as an illustration of folk
religion’s more direct connection to China’s “great tradition” at the level of
collective ritual activities (as opposed to private religious settings). In collec-
tive rituals, human relations with the gods are not a matter of individual peo-
ple but of communities—individuals need not worry about improper behavior
causing insult to the deities. In this sense, folk religion is not some kind of
mystical madness, and it is unscientific to label all Chinese folk beliefs as
“superstition” (Fan, 2017).10

Different types of spirit mediums involve different modes of interaction
between humans and the gods. In interactions based on block divination, the
deity plays an arbitrator’s role, providing information of a decision-making
nature. In interactions based on tongji mediums, on the other hand, the god
plays more of a consultant’s role, providing information of a predictive
nature. Once decision-making information is provided, the only question is
whether it is authoritative, but when predictive information is given, there
remains a question as to its accuracy or effectiveness. Based on expectations
about the deity and the impetus of curiosity, people pay greater attention to
the degree to which predictive information is accurate, and accurate informa-
tion can become more widely disseminated.
Patterns in the Transmission of Sacred Information

In interaction between humans and deities via tongji mediums, the relationship is between gods and individual people, and the information provided is predictive. For now, let us call this “sacred information” in order to distinguish it from mundane information among humans, because there is clearly a difference between the mundane and the sacred when it comes to the transmission of information. The transmission of mundane information is characterized by the common saying, “Good news does not leave the house, bad news travels a thousand li.” The transmission of sacred information, on the other hand, is characterized by the saying, “The flower blooms inside the wall, its fragrance drifts outside.”

When people consult a god through a tongji medium, they ask the god to dispel evil or resolve difficulties while also vowing repayment if the advice or prediction proves effective. An individual’s request for guidance from and vow to repay a deity is actually the establishment of a “principal–agent” relation, with the tongji as agent. The principal’s rite of repayment of the god takes place at the tongji’s home. The principal needs to pay a sum of money and the tongji can “prepare the ritual site” 做道场. This becomes an activity of religious economy that some scholars call “the economy of magical power” (Chen, 2008). From the tongji’s perspective, it is obviously necessary to constantly maintain and upgrade the power of the deity who possesses her body.

According to Chen Wei-Hwa’s definition, “magical power” 灵力 indicates a deity’s ability to respond effectively to people’s requests. Such power is essential for the survival of a certain deity or even of folk religion in general. The judgment of whether a deity is effective is social and public. Magical power is not a natural state, but a result of human action. The power of every deity is not stable and unchanging, but dynamic (Chen, 2008). Stephan Feuchtwang argues that  ling 灵 (supernatural efficacy or power) is a socially produced concept, like prestige, beyond individual motivation (2008 [1992]: 158). Magical power is indeed social, and it is also something that rises and falls over time, but this rising and falling is generally cyclical, which is to say that it follows a pattern. This pattern is not simply a result of the tongji’s business: the community of believers participates in the construction of magical power through word of mouth, and they cause its decline by voting with their feet. This behavior on the part of believers vividly illustrates people’s agency and subjectivity in the practice of Chinese folk religion.

Nowadays in rural Putian, for a specific group of believers the magical power of a tongji rises and falls in cycles of about three years. An interesting phenomenon is that believers from all over continually seek out tongji in
other villagers farther and farther away. Although one village’s tongji may have lost her efficacy long ago, this does not in the least inhibit other villages’ believers from flocking to her like ducks. There have always been folk sayings such as “nearby temples anger the gods,” “the distant is more valuable than the near,” and “it is easier for monks from afar to recite scripture.” All suggest that the relation between deities and their believers seems to involve a reversed differential mode of association: the more distant the relation, the better it is, and vice versa. How did this come about?

When believers consult a deity through a tongji, there is always an issue of probability with regard to magical efficacy. Believers take a very cautious approach toward this question. If a consultation is ineffective, they usually attribute this not to the deity itself but to one or the other of two possible causes. One possibility is that the tongji has declined in quality, so the god is no longer willing to possess her and the words coming from her mouth do not represent the god’s actual intention. A second possibility is a problem with the principal herself: maybe the content of her request was inappropriate, or perhaps she in a previous life or one of her ancestors committed some sin from which they have been unable to extricate themselves. If a believer spreads news about magical inefficacy, it could both disgrace her family and besmirch the god’s reputation. Believers thus adopt a strategy of selective transmission of information about whether a given deity is effective. If it is effective, they actively publicize it, showing that they have received blessings and are doing well while also bringing honor to the god. If it is ineffective, they carefully cover it up, neither returning to the tongji’s home nor allowing information about the matter to leak out, trying to avoid a situation where “bad news travels one thousand li.” Both this situation where only positive information about gods’ effectiveness is spread among believers, not to mention this behavior of publicizing sacred information about magical power to begin with, are equivalent to eulogizing the gods through actual practice. The result is that when believers rush about informing one another, there is a tendency toward exaggeration, fabrication, and embellishment, with ever more vivid descriptions of a powerful god (Yue, 2014: 151).11

Information economics and communication theory both offer explanations of the transmission of information as phenomena of social life. Information economics argues that, “When information is distributed in an asymmetrical manner, there is an incentive not only to acquire information but also to transmit it” (Arrow, 1989: 230). Communication theory also notes the phenomenon of selective communication: “Although individuals act together somehow in communication, everything happening in this process is produced through selection in the brains of the various participating individuals” (Littlejohn and Foss, 1999: 215). Believers participating in the transmission of sacred information are obviously incentivized to be selective in what they share.
The process whereby an individual is possessed by a deity and becomes a tongji usually occurs quietly, with neither public ritual nor any formal announcement. This contrasts with the situation in contemporary Taiwan. In rural Taiwan, to become a tongji who is recognized by the community requires a series of complex, public probationary procedures such as guan tongji 关童乩, zuojin 坐禁, luodifu 落地府, and guohuo 过火 (Lin, 2015: 201–2). This difference across the Strait is probably related to mainland China’s experience of revolutionary unrest that once drove tongji activities underground.

If we regard a tongji who is inconspicuously possessed by a deity as the center of concentric circles, the structure of these circles can be divided into inner, middle, and outer layers. The first batch of believers invariably consists of people from the same village as the tongji or close friends and relatives. These make up the inner circle of believers who are the first to consult the deity through this tongji. When they transmit sacred information about the deity’s effectiveness to the intermediate circle, they also secretly screen out any information about unsuccessful consultations. When the number of such unsuccessful cases accumulates to a certain point, or when ineffectiveness becomes a more likely outcome of a consultation than effectiveness, the masses of believers may gradually abandon their faith in that tongji and begin inquiring about others. This voting with their feet in the selection of tongji could be likened to what is called “conversion” in religious studies (Lin, 2003: 550). It may be more rigorous, however, to explain this using the principles of information economics, that is, “the maximization of expected utility determines individual behavior, among which expectations are calculated according to individuals’ own probabilities” (Arrow, 1989: 166). If the probability of magical effectiveness is too low, believers will abandon their expectations about that tongji’s power. As far as believers in the inner circle are concerned, from their first consultation with the village’s tongji until their abandonment of expectations about her effectiveness, the duration of this process is the cycle of the tongji’s magical power (relative to a given set of believers). This cycle actually indicates that the probability of ineffectiveness accumulated during that period for a given set of believers has already surpassed the probability of effectiveness. If we use the saying “the flower blooms inside the wall, its fragrance drifts outside” as a metaphor for the rise and fall of a tongji’s power, when believers in the inner circle cease to harbor expectations about a tongji’s effectiveness, that means the flower inside the wall has lost its fragrance. It is not that people inside the wall can never smell the flower or that the wall is impermeable—as the flower’s fragrance drifts, the wall shifts, and the people outside become insiders. The flower’s fragrance keeps drifting beyond the wall, but the wall moves with it, and those who had originally smelled it from outside become people inside the wall.
That is to say, although believers in the inner circle abandon a tongji, the sacred information they transmit continuously moves outward to the intermediate circle. When believers in the middle circle receive this information, they scale the wall and move to the tongji’s inner circle, reedifying the tongji who was being abandoned by the earlier set of believers. As time elapses, that second set of believers from the middle circle in turn abandons the tongji and those in the outer circle eventually receive information about her power and come from afar to seek her out.

Through the preceding analysis it can be seen that the mechanism for the transmission of sacred knowledge is that, with a tongji as the center of concentric circles, the first batch of believers constitutes the inner circle transmitting information about her magical power. Since these believers filter and control any negative information about the tongji’s power, believers in the middle circle are shielded from it and receive only positive information from the inner circle, leading them to construct a positive image of the tongji’s power. By the time believers in the second circle have accumulated negative information, they in turn filter that out and transmit only positive information to the outer circle of believers. This pattern continues until the tongji’s reputation is spread far and wide.

The speed at which such sacred information is transmitted depends on the speed of oral communication among believers, which in turn depends on the frequency of their interaction and the accessibility of activities within the radius. With the spread of motorized transportation, cellular telephones, smartphones, and social media such as WeChat throughout rural China, the speed of communication has grown faster than ever, with information about tongji from a certain place often arriving unexpectedly. Meanwhile, in the same amount of time, the spatial radius of communication too has grown larger than ever before. The result is that believers in the outer circle receive information from the inner and middle circles more frequently, shortening the cycles for accumulating negative information, meaning that the cycles for the rise and fall of tongji power have in turn become shorter. It must be added, however, that this expansion of the communication radius has increased the scale of each population of devotees and the scope of their circles. Assuming that the time each tongji has to conduct consultations is limited, it must take a longer time for larger populations of devotees to accumulate enough negative information for ineffectiveness to become the more probable outcome, and this to some extent lengthens the cycles of the rise and fall of a tongji’s power. Although the radius of transmission of sacred information may be greater than that for villagers’ everyday social interactions, as far as tongji are concerned, the radius of the distribution of potential devotees is still limited—usually to
the distance motorized vehicles (such as motorcycles) can travel round trip in one day. The general tendency, then, is for the cycles of the rise and fall of tongji power to become shorter.

Corresponding to these cycles and patterns regarding the transmission of sacred information is the pattern of the rise and fall of a tongji’s magical power, namely that the radius of power increases over time. Spatially, the area covered by a tongji’s power is neither round (except for the inner circle) nor fan-shaped, but structured in concentric circles. Temporally, it is only after a tongji’s radiometric force 辐射力 declines from the inner circle that it may radiate to the middle and outer circles.

**Conclusion**

Researching folk religion from the perspective of information and its isolation, demand, asymmetry, communication, and transmission enables us more clearly to observe the rules of interaction among gods, ghosts, and living people, and more easily to obtain an internal perspective approaching the psychological world of believers, discovering the trajectory of folk religious practice.

If folk beliefs, as a part of everyday life for the lower strata of rural people, are simply denounced as “superstition” or “ignorance,” that would obviously prevent us from understanding the behavioral logic of Chinese rural society. In the practice of Chinese folk religion, we often see believers’ subjectivity and agency as people; they are not a bunch of “ignorant men and women” completely groveling at the feet of deities. In this respect, whether it is Adam Yuet Chau’s notion of “doing religion” or Yue Yongyi’s emphasis on the ideology of “rural religious” practice (2014: 88), both are aimed at highlighting subjectivity in Chinese folk religion and avoiding the use of external religious standards to rigidly measure it.

Folkloristic studies of folk religion have already yielded fine results, but the field urgently needs to open up to orientations of the social and behavioral sciences. Nearly all theory in the field of religious studies is based on the study of institutionalized religion, but Chinese folk beliefs constitute a “diffuse religion” (Yang, 2016 [1961]: 228–33). Since existing theory is thus not entirely appropriate, we must come up with concepts based on the activities of Chinese folk religion (such as the “transmission of sacred information” and the “differential mode of association” among gods, ghosts, and humans introduced in this article), or mid-level theory that can facilitate the understanding of folk beliefs as everyday activities. To a certain extent, this will decrease the stigmatization of folk religion in modern public opinion and expand modern people’s understanding of folk beliefs.
Acknowledgments
The author would like to thank the anonymous referee for his or her helpful suggestions, which have been incorporated in the article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes
3. According to Chen Lisheng, “The care of a humane person 仁者 for others is actually ‘joined by blood’ and related to ‘a single body’ 一体. A traditional saying goes, ‘A son is the heart, head, and body of his father and mother; a humane person treats heaven, earth, and the ten thousand things as the heart, head, and body; unwilling to part or to relax, this is not hard to understand’” (Chen Lisheng, 2016: 110–20).
4. David Jordan (“Taiwanese Poe Divination: Statistical Awareness and Religious Belief”) points out that the probability of an auspicious outcome is 50 percent for one throw and about 1 in 8 for three throws, and since all believers know this, they must spend a great deal of time on many throws (cited in Hansen, 1999 [1990]: 62).
5. The line from the Book of Rites used here is from James Legge’s translation (1885: 237–38).
6. The translations from the Analects are by Watson, 2007: 28 and 45.
7. The concept of “spiritual humanism” was invented by Tu Weiming 杜维明. On November 12, 2014, Tu gave a public talk at Sun Yat-sen University on “The Spiritual Humanism of Confucianism.” For a related discussion, also see his major work, “儒家心性之学的当代意义” (Tu, 2011).
8. While conducting fieldwork in Taoyuan, Taiwan, anthropologist Lin Wei-ping discovered that, “In the past, jitong 占童 [mediums] were the spokespeople of deities, interpreting their will as expressed in the dream world. In urban shrines, however, they can make inquiries and suggestions and even converse with deities. Communication between gods and humans is no longer a top-down affair. Now, through block divination, jitong can transmit their own intentions and the expectations of believers.” “Block divination enables believers more directly to project their ideas and imaginings.” “A jitong who has undergone the selecting ritual must gradually become familiar with local networks and all kinds of
community issues in order to help believers solve various problems, large and small. We could say that deities take on a concrete form among humans through the body of jitong and then enter the social networks of believers.” It is worth pointing out that, in Taiwan, block divination is often performed by jitong as well, at which times they are not in a state of possession by a deity. See Lin, 2015: 218–19, and 202.

9. Adam Yuet Chau refers to the religious activities of Chinese people as “doing religion.” Modalities of doing religion include: (1) the scriptural/discursive, (2) the self-cultivational, (3) the liturgical, (4) the immediate-practical \(即时灵验\), and (5) the relational. All of these methods can be accepted by individuals and social groups, although factors such as class, gender, literacy, contingencies of birth and place of residence, location in social networks, and personal qualities may cause certain people to be inclined toward certain modalities rather than others. The most important strength of this concept of “the modalities of doing religion” is that it focuses on the methods whereby people do religion rather than their religious views. See Chau, 2006: 75–76.

10. Fan Ke points out that “local documents from various places reveal numerous records of peasants who, angered because the City God or Dragon King failed to bring rain in response to prayers, pulled the god’s statue out of the temple and whipped it in the street, and in some cases even threatened to burn the temple down” (Fan, 2017: 10).

11. In Li township, Zhao county, Hebei, Yue Yongyi also discovered that “in Li township, information about success disappears without a trace. At least those who seek help and obtain it and their friends and relatives will happily transmit and promote [such information]” (Yue, 2014: 151).

12. In addition, Li Yih-yuan categorized the emergence of spirit mediums into three types: innate, cultural, and social. If there is no mentally abnormal person and cultural cues turn out to be inconclusive, then a few candidates will be chosen and trained by the deity (Li, 1998: 194–96).

13. In Yue Yongyi’s concept of “rural religion” 乡土宗教, “what rural religion emphasizes is not ideology but the practice of ideology or, shall we say, the ideology of practice” (Yue, 2014: 88).

References


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