

## Authority, Practice and History: Adoption and Re-creation of *Yaoqian* in Taiwan\*

Jin-shiu Jessie Sung\*\*

### ABSTRACT

In this paper, I aim to discuss the production of medical knowledge in rural Taiwan in light of the adoption and re-creation of prescription divinations (*yaoqian*), which entails an interrogation of the relation between authority, practice and history. My data are derived from ethnographic fieldwork and the laboriously collected materials of *yaoqian* from temples. Involved in this production of medical knowledge are local authorities, individual specialists, and the supplicants soliciting *yaoqian*. The key issues I raise include the following. How has such medical knowledge been historically established as a local practice? How has its healing efficacy been perceived by the faithful? What is thought to endow *yaoqian* with the power to heal in general? And further, what is the difference in essence between the diverse collections of *yaoqian*?

First of all, I suggested that the healing efficacy in soliciting *yaoqian* was perceived through a series of standard procedures with self-examination and easy access. Moreover, the solicitation of *yaoqian* is an act of divination established on the basis of morality and godliness of the worshippers. Among the procedures, the casting of wooden blocks (*buabuei* in South Fukien) serves as a cultural mechanism crucial for knowing what is unknown and obtaining multiple divine confirmations, which reflects the major logic of the practice.

Secondly, by using the ‘lineage’ approach instead of the divine origin ‘system’, I suggested that there exists ‘alienation’ between divine origins and healing power of *yaoqian*. There is no *Dadagong qian*, *Wuguwang qian*, *Lüzu*

---

\* This work was supported by Academia Sinica funded project-program Religion and Medicine (2002-2004), Taipei. Paper draft has been presented at the 17th New Zealand Asian Studies Society International Conference co-organized by NZASIA and the University of Otago, Dunedin, 22nd–25th November, 2007. I would like to express gratitude to Prof. Margaret Jolly, Dr. Tamara Jacka, Dr. Jin-bao Nie, as well as Dr. An-bang Yu, Dr. Hsun Chang and Dr. Fu-shi Lin for their kindly sharing and understanding. My special thanks go to two anonymous reviewers for the journal for their great comments and their patience with my belated responses due to personal condition. I would also like to express my sincere appreciation to Prof. Ts'ui-jung Liu and Dr. Paul Katz who read the first revision of this paper and offered me very inspiring suggestions.

\*\* Research Assistant, Institute of Taiwan History, Academia Sinica, Taipei, Taiwan  
來稿日期：2011年10月31日；通過刊登：2012年6月27日。

*qian* or *Mazu qian* in essence, since most *Mazu qian*, *Dadaogong qian* and *Lüzü qian* were used interchangeably by those temples dedicated to the three Gods of Medicine (*yi yao shen*) and the Goddess of Heaven (Mazu).

Finally, with my lineage analysis I noted that the decision on which collection of *yaoqian* was to be adopted by an individual temple was influenced by historical ties with its premier temple, as well as the changes in timeline. Moreover, the impact of social factors on the adoption and re-creation of *yaoqian* collections is of great importance. By tracing the circulation of *Efficacious Prescription Divinations from Lüdi* (*Lüdi xianfang*) with many editions published, I highlighted that the influence of printing and the performative mediator of phoenix halls (*luantang*) have contributed to the production of *yaoqian*. In particular, the initiated members of phoenix halls and local gentry with textual knowledge administrating *luantang* are crucial to the transmission and local adaptation of *yaoqian* knowledge.

**Keywords:** Soliciting Divination for Health Problems (*zhanbu wenji*), Prescription Divination (*yaoqian*), Local Practice, Phoenix Halls (*luantang*), Production of Medical Knowledge