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Transformation in *Dang-ki* Healing: The Embodied Self and Perceived Legitimacy

by

Boon-Ooi Lee

Nanyang Technological University

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Boon-Ooi Lee, No. 1, Nanyang Walk, Singapore 637616. National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. E-mail: boonooi.lee@nie.edu.sg, Fax: (65) 68969410

Abstract

Since spirit possession in mediumship and shamanism resembles psychotic symptoms, early researchers perceived spirit mediums and shamans as psychiatric patients whose psychopathology was culturally sanctioned. However, other researchers have not only challenged this assumption, but also proposed that spirit possession has transformative benefits. The idiom of spirit possession provides cultural meanings for spirit mediums and shamans to express and transform their personal experiences. The present case study focuses on *dang-ki* healing, a form of Chinese mediumship practiced in Singapore, in which a deity possesses a human (i.e., *dang-ki*) to offer aid to supplicants. This study seeks to explore whether involvement in *dang-ki* healing is transformative; and if so, how the *dang-ki*'s transformation is related to his self and the perceived legitimacy of his mediumship. At a shrine, I interviewed 20 participants, including a male *dang-ki*, 10 temple assistants, and nine clients. The results obtained were supportive of the therapeutic nature of spirit possession. First, there is a relationship between his self-transformation and the perceived legitimacy of his mediumship. As his clients and community have recognized his spirit possession as genuine, and the healing power of his possessing god, he is able to make use of mediumship as a means for spiritual development. Second, he has developed his spirituality by internalizing his god's positive traits (e.g., compassion). Deities worshipped in *dang-ki* healing can be conceptualized as ideal selves who represent a wide range of positive traits and moral values of Chinese culture. Thus, the possession of a deity is the embodiment of an ideal self. Finally, the *dang-ki*'s transformation may run parallel to his god's transformation. In Chinese religions, gods have to constantly develop their spirituality even though they are already gods. An understanding of the god's spiritual development further sheds light on the *dang-ki*'s self-transformation.

Key words: Transformation, spirit possession, *dang-ki*, shamanism, spirit mediumship

Transformation in *Dang-ki* Healing: The Embodied Self and Perceived Legitimacy

Spirit possession is a form of ritual practice and a cultural belief system (Halperin, 1996) in which the human being is viewed "as consisting of several elements (such as body, mind, personhood, self, name, identity, soul or souls, even part souls) where one or more of these may be replaced, temporarily or permanently, by another entity" (Bourguignon, 2004, p. 137). Indigenously, this alien entity is conceptualized as an ancestral spirit, ghost, demon, or deity. The present case study focuses on divine possession in spirit mediumship and shamanism. From the Western psychiatric perspective, the resemblance between spirit possession and psychotic symptoms led some early theorists to perceive mediums and shamans as psychiatric patients whose psychopathology had, nevertheless, been culturally sanctioned (Silverman, 1967; see reviews by Krippner, 2002; Lin, 2011). However, with a better understanding of altered consciousness (Cardena and Winkelman, 2011) and dissociative experiences (Seligman and Kirmayer, 2008) across cultures, empirical data accumulated over years have demonstrated that most mediums and shamans are not mentally ill (Atkinson, 1992; Krippner, 2002; Lin, 2011; Moreira-Almeida, Neto, and Cardena, 2008; Rutherford, 1986; Stephen and Suryani, 2000). In order to function as a healer, they must be in touch with reality, maintain control over their behaviors, and be able to understand their clients' problems (Hicks, 2010).

Rather than being pathological, there is evidence that involvement in spirit possession may be therapeutic for the healer (Chapin, 2008; Obeyesekere, 1981, 1990; Seligman, 2014). Mediums and shamans perceive the illnesses they experience during initiation as spiritual calling and training. They develop the ability to heal others, while being healed by their possessing gods. This transformation process leads Halifax (1982) to consider these practitioners as wounded healers who derive healing power from their own suffering (see Jung, 1951). Although there are many studies on mediumship and shamanism, not many studies have addressed the healer's transformation in spirit possession. Using a case example,

the present study seeks to explore the transformation through spirit possession in *dang-ki* healing, a form of Chinese spirit mediumship in Singapore. Since the healers' transformations will not be possible without the approval of their communities, it is important to explore how their transformations are related to the perceived legitimacy of their spirit possession. Perceived legitimacy refers to the client perceptions of the healers' credentials, their competencies, the genuineness of their spirit possession, and their possessing gods' abilities in meeting the clients' needs.

First, the characteristics of *dang-ki* healing, its meaning, belief systems, clients, and healing aspects are described. Second, the transformation in spirit possession, and the client perception of the healer's legitimacy are reviewed, followed by the presentation of research findings.

<div align="center">Characteristics of *Dang-ki* Healing</div>

Meaning of *Dang-ki* Healing

Although there is no single origin of *dang-ki* healing (Rutherford, 1986), it might have evolved from ancient magico-religions and shamanism in China (Chan, 2006). The Chinese brought this practice with them while migrating to Southeast Asia. When taking roots in their new home, this Chinese healing absorbed local beliefs into its practice. For example, there is no offering of pork to Muslim spirits (DeBernardi, 2006).

*Dang-ki* healing is found in Singapore (Chan, 2006; Elliott. 1955; Lee, Kirmayer, and Groleau, 2010), Malaysia (DeBernardi, 2006; R. Lee, 1986), and Taiwan (Huang, 2004; Kleinman, 1980; Nickerson, 2001; Wolf, 1990; Zheng, 2004). In this healing practice, a deity possesses a human, who is called *dang-ki* (童乩 or 乩童), to offer aid to supplicants. Since

*dang-ki* is usually a male (Chan, 2006; DeBernardi, 2006), the pronoun "he" is used throughout this case study.

There are different interpretations of the word "*dang*," which literally means "child." It may imply that *dang-ki*, regardless of his actual age, has a spiritual condition as a "child", and so is suitable for divine possession (Chan, 2006; Holbrook, 1975), or that *dang-ki* is a "child of the god" (Sutton, 1990). For other researchers (Lin, 2011; Zheng, 2004), "*dang*" is a phonographic word derived from the ancient *yue* language (古越語) of southern China or Southern Asia, which refers to divine possession or individuals who can be possessed by deities. The word "*ki*" means divination, instruments used for summoning divine forces, divine possession, or communication with gods.

The central feature of *dang-ki* healing is spirit possession. It does not have the shamanistic characteristics described by Winkelman (2010), for example, soul journey, vision quest, animal transformation, or contact with animal spirits. A *dang-ki* has to enter a trance to be possessed and often reports amnesia after the possession (Chan, 2006).[1]

Beliefs and Practice of *Dang-ki* Healing

The beliefs and practice of *dang-ki* healing are embedded in Chinese religious beliefs, which are an amalgam of Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism (see Ji-Yuan, 1993; Ning,

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[1] Whether the *dang-ki* is a shaman or a medium is debatable. He is labeled as a shaman by some researchers (Ahern, 1978; Holbrook, 1975; Lin, 2011; Tseng, 1978; Wolf, 1990) and as a medium by others (Chan, 2006; DeBernardi, 2006; R. Lee, 1986). Most of these researchers, except Chan (2006), did not define the terms shaman or medium in their studies. Following other theorists (Eliade, 1964; Krippner, 2004; Winkelman, 2010), Chan argues that mediums *are* possessed and act under the power of spirits, whereas shamans invite spirits to come and assist them in their work. Shamans are *not* possessed by spirits but are in control of spirits. However, some researchers assert that shamans can become possessed (Heinze 1997; Lewis, 1989; Peters and Price-Williams, 1980; Yamada, 1999). In fact, both spirit possession and soul journey are the central features of Tungus shamanism (Shirokogoroff, 1935), from which the very term "shaman" has originated (Jakobsen, 1999). Both features are also present in Nepalese shamans (Sidky, 2010). Given the complexity and ambiguity of the terms "shamanism" and "spirit mediumship", it may be more useful to distinguish between the emic and etic perspectives of these traditions; and interpret "shamans" and "mediums" according to their functions and the roles they play in their respective communities.

2006). These beliefs are clearly reflected in the *dang-ki*s' beliefs, for example, karma, fate, cycle of reincarnation, geomancy, divination, filial piety, social harmony, and kinship (B. O. Lee, 2007). Under the influence of Taoist medicine (see Ji-Yuan, 1993; Zheng, 2004), *dang-ki*s use a mixture of healing methods, including herbs, acupuncture, massage, prayer, talismans, chanting, and meditation.

However, unlike the organized Taoism and Buddhism, *dang-ki* healing does not have a formal institutional structure, standardized doctrine, and formal training for its religious personnel (Chan, 2006). Most *dang-ki*s are part-timers holding regular jobs. People become a *dang-ki* to show gratitude to their gods for curing their illnesses, for divine protection, as a part of their family traditions where parents and siblings are also *dang-ki*s, after having some anomalous experiences such as apparitions of spirits, or after the gods have chosen them (Chan, 2006; DeBernardi, 2006; Heinze, 1997).

Social Context and *Dang-ki*s' Clients

In 2015, there were 3.90 million residents in Singapore (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2015). Chinese formed the majority (74.3%), followed by Malays (13.3%), and Indians (9.1%). Most Chinese were affiliated with traditional Chinese religions, consisting of Buddhism (42.3%) and Taoism (12.9%), while the rest with Christianity (20.9%), and other religions (0.6%). The proportion of Chinese without religious affiliation was 23.3%. These ethnic and religious distributions may be conducive for the survival and development of *dang-ki* healing in Singapore. As mentioned, the worldviews of *dang-ki* healing are embedded in Buddhism and Taoism. A majority of *dang-ki*s' clients are also Chinese who believe in these religions. In a previous study with 97 *dang-ki*s' clients in three temples, I found that 33.0% identified themselves as *bai-sin* (拜神; worshipers of gods), 26.8% as Taoists, 25.8% as Buddhists, 7.2% as both Taoists and Buddhists, and 7.2% as

nonreligionists (B. O. Lee, 2007).[2] However, *dang-ki* healing may gradually become a

marginal healing system utilized by a small group of Chinese Singaporeans. From 1990 to

2015, there had been a trend among the Chinese to shift their declared religions. The number

of Buddhists and Taoists had declined from 68.0% to 55.2%, whereas the number of

Christians had increased from 14.3% to 20.9%.

Religious affiliation is correlated with age, language, education, and socioeconomic

status among the Chinese Singaporeans (Tong, 2008). Chinese Christians tend to be younger

(especially in the 20 to 39 age group), English-educated and speaking, university-educated,

and of a higher socioeconomic status. Better-educated Chinese tend to abandon their

traditional faiths and become Christians or nonreligionists. Although there have been an

increasing number of Buddhists among university graduates, more than half of the Buddhists

still hold an educational qualification below secondary school level. Buddhists also tend to be

older (50 and above). Taoists, who are demographically the opposite of Christians, incline to

be older, Mandarin or dialect-speaking, poorly educated (either with no formal or below

secondary school education), and of a lower socioeconomic status. This census information is

consistent with the profile of *dang-ki*s' clients who mostly believed in traditional Chinese

religions (B. O. Lee, 2007). They were older (with an average age of 47 years), homemakers

(61.9% were female), worked in service and nonprofessional sectors (91.7%), held secondary

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[2] Those who called themselves *bai-sin* looked rather puzzled when I asked for their religious affiliation. They pointed to the god statues on the altars and replied "*bai-sin*." Their reactions suggest that the census classification of religious affiliation has never come into their mind. Worshipping and consulting deities (through *dang-ki*s) is simply a part of their lives. Du-Bien (1998) argues that the view that Chinese religious beliefs are a mixture of the three main Chinese religions (i.e., Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism) does not represent the concerns of the ordinary people. Chinese religion is an indigenous folk religious system that is not exclusively affiliated to any organized religion. The deities that ordinary people worship do not come from formal religious doctrines or texts but are invisible from their daily lives. In daily life, not only is it impossible to identify and differentiate which religions (e.g., Taoism or Buddhism) are the sources for certain beliefs and rituals, but it is also meaningless. For ordinary Chinese people, deities are worshipped not because they are Buddhist or Taoist gods but because they are able to provide protection and fulfill one's wishes. As such, Chinese people are more concerned about the competencies rather than the origins of their deities (Elliott, 1955; Heinze, 1997). Such a pragmatic attitude may influence how people perceive the legitimacy of *dang-ki* healing.

or lower educational qualification (87.6%), and had a monthly total household income below S$2,999 (63.9%). With their educational qualifications and total household incomes being lower than those of the general population (see Singapore Department of Statistics, 2011), they can be classify as working classes. Largely, Singapore can be considered as a middle-class society (Tan, 2004).

Thus, *dang-ki* healing mainly attracts women, older, working classes, and believers of Chinese religions. In the long run, *dang-ki* healing may have difficulty in attracting members when competing with organized religions, particularly Christianity. To survive, *dang-ki* healing has to sustain its credibility among its clients. One of the aims of this case study is to understand whether the *dang-ki*'s transformation is related to his clients' perceived legitimacy.

Nonetheless, *dang-ki* healing may serve as a form of social support and indigenous psychotherapy for people from working classes. Previous research has found that these people tended to show higher rates of mental disorders (Sue and Sue, 2013; Wadsworth and Achenbach, 2005), but underutilize mental health services (Ng, Fones, and Kua, 2003). *Dang-ki* healing may serve certain therapeutic functions beyond the reach of modern mental health care.

Therapeutic Aspects of *Dang-ki* Healing

Previous researchers have studied various aspects of *dang-ki* healing, including its historical origins (Chan, 2006; Zheng, 2004), performance rituals (Chan, 2006; Sutton, 1990), and sociocultural functions in contemporary societies (DeBernardi, 2006; Jordan, 1972; R. Lee, 1986; Nickerson; 2001). The main role of a *dang-ki* is a healer, as most of the issues presented to him are health related (DeBernardi, 2006; Elliott. 1955; Huang, 2004; B. O. Lee, 2007; Lin, 2011). Some researchers have investigated the process and outcome of *dang-ki*

healing in Singapore (Lee et al., 2010) and Taiwan (Kleinman, 1980; Kleinman and Gale, 1982; Kleinman and Sung, 1979). Based on the clients' self-reports, *dang-ki* healing is perceived to be effective to some extent.

However, to be an effective healing system, *dang-ki* healing must be culturally sanctioned at first. A person cannot function as a *dang-ki* without the recognition of his clients and community. To perform as an effective and legitimate healer, he has to achieve a state of personality and social integration (see Obeyesekere, 1981, 1990); two interrelated processes in the transformation of mediums and shamans. There are a few reasons for studying the *dang-ki*'s transformation. First, to the best of my knowledge, there has been no such research conducted earlier. All the studies on the transformation of mediums and shamans have been conducted in non-Chinese cultures (Chapin, 2008; Obeyesekere, 1981, 1990; Seligman, 2014). It will be interesting to compare *dang-ki*s with mediums and shamans from other cultures in terms of their experiences. Second, this case study systematically examines how the perceived legitimacy of the *dang-ki*'s mediumship is related to his transformation. Although previous studies have touched on this perceived legitimacy, none of them have examined it as a main research question or linked it to the healer's transformation.

## Healer's Transformation in Spirit Possession

Following the works of previous researchers (Obeyesekere, 1981, 1990; Seligman, 2014), I propose that the *dang-ki*'s transformation is related to his sense of self. Self is a cognitive schema about our selves, which organizes and guides the processing of self-related information contained in our social experiences (Markus, 1977). This self-related information includes self-awareness, self-concept, self-identity, self-esteem, and memory of past experiences, and future expectations (Baumeister, 2003). Due to our unique biological and psychosocial experiences, each of us has constructed our personal cognitive schema that we

may not share with each other. However, in order to function as a group, we also share

cognitive resources with other people in terms of languages, social norms, and values. Thus,

the concept of self can be perceived as both private and public (Shore, 1996). This

conceptualization provides a useful framework for exploring the *dang-ki*'s self-

transformation at both personal and cultural levels. As shown in previous studies, mediums

and shamans have suffered from a wide range of personal issues related to grief, trauma,

sexual orientation, substance abuse, family conflicts, marital discords, troubled childhood,

poverty, violence, and loneliness (Chapin, 2008; Obeyesekere, 1981; Seligman, 2014). They

individually used the cultural model of mediumship to interpret and cope with their inner

conflicts. Shore (1996) perceives culture as a heterogeneous collection of models or schemas

such that culture is a public cognitive schema that people share in a cultural group. This

public cognitive schema provides people with a system of meanings or symbols for

socialization and communication so that they are able to function as a group (D'Andrade,

1984). From this perspective, spirit possession can be perceived as a form of cultural idiom

that mediums and shamans use to interpret, express, and communicate their personal

experiences. Obeyesekere (1981) related a case about a woman who suffered from a series of

life events: being abandoned by her father, spirit attacks (fainting spells), interpersonal

conflicts, and apparitions of supernatural beings. Her community interpreted these

experiences as signs of spirit possession induced by angry ancestral spirits because they

wanted to punish her for her betrayal. This idiom of spirit possession was acted on both

personal and cultural levels because its meaning was clear to the woman and her community.

By contrast, if she had been referred for psychiatric evaluation, she might have been

diagnosed with mental disorder, an idiom that only makes sense to mental health

professionals, but not to her and her community. This is because psychiatric diagnosis is a

cultural model of Western psychiatry. By showing repentance for her wrong doings, the

spirits turned benevolent and became her communicants with the deities. She transformed from a person replete with hatred, loss, and guilt to a priestess helping others in misfortune. Similarly, Chapin (2008) presented a case about a Sri Lankan woman who worked through her pathological dissociation by becoming a priestess engaging in culturally recognized possession trance. The idiom of possession did not only help manage her internal conflicts, but also helped her to restore social relationships, and to take on a new role as a respected priestess. It is important to note that the cultural idiom of spirit possession does not only help regulate the shamans' and mediums' inner conflicts, but also help integrate them back into their social groups (Obeyesekere, 1981). These case examples suggest that self is not a static entity, but is best understood "as becoming, which is a temporal process" (Polkinghorne, 1991, p. 144). As such, the concept of self has a narrative structure, emphasizing the developmental dimension of human existence. We can view the medium's self as a narrative through which he uses the cultural idiom of spirit possession to reauthor his negative life events and actions into a meaningful whole. The spirit possession, mediumship, and initiation are cultural plots that help him reintegrate and renew his sense of self.

Seligman (2014) further proposes that the mediums' self-transformation involves not only psychosocial and cultural processes, but also embodiment. Embodiment refers "both to actual bodily states and to simulations of experiences in the brain's modality-specific systems for perception, action, and introspection." (Niedenthal et al., 2005, p. 184). Accordingly, self is more than its cognitive-discursive and reflexive elements. Cognition, linguistic processes, and affect are grounded in the brain's modality-specific systems (e.g., visual, auditory, or spatial); and in the interactions between the body, and the social and physical environments (Barsalou, Barbey, Simmons, and Santos, 2005). Seligman (2014) advances the concept of biolooping to denote these interactions. She argues that "the embodied dimensions of self are shaped and reshaped through their interactions with sociocultural meanings, discourse, and

practices" (p. 27). She found that, prior to their initiation, the mediums suffered from psychosocial stressors that disrupted their self-coherence, leading to internal conflicts and various somatic symptoms. When seeking help at the Candomble religious centers, most of them went into trance and were advised by their spiritual healers to become mediums. During their initiations, they were temporarily separated from their usual social context, roles, and relationships. They replaced their previous self-identities (e.g., a helpless widow or a rebellious gay man) with a new identity and social role (i.e., medium). This transformation of self-identity was characterized by changes in bodily appearance (i.e., head shaving), and by involving in various embodied practices, such as singing, dancing, and eating only ritual foods. During spirit possession, they behaved according to their deities' characters and personalities. They had amnesia, nonvolitional bodily responses, and uncontrollable bodily arousal. These bodily experiences in turn reinforced their roles as mediums and the endorsements of their communities. This process of biolooping suggests that the mediums' learning experiences shape their bodily qualities according to the cultural model of mediumship, which in turn influence their subsequent behaviors, motivations, and interpersonal interactions.

The above review has provided useful directions for the present case study. First, it is relevant to explore how the *dang-ki*'s possession experience relates to his personal biography and life events; more specifically, whether the idiom of spirit possession provides avenues for his self-reflection, personal transformation, and integration with his community. To facilitate integration, the *dang-ki*'s roles and behaviors have to be accepted by his community, which is one of the aims of this case study, which will be discussed in the next section. Second, by perceiving spirit possession as a cultural idiom rather than as a mental disorder, we are able to explore the healing potentials of this cultural phenomenon. Thus, *dang-ki* healing is seen as a social role constructed and defined in a cultural model. Finally, the roles that the embodied

self plays in spirit possession would provide further insight into the *dang-ki*'s transformation. *Dang-ki* healing is characterized by a series of embodied processes, such as changes in physical appearance, intensive gestures and motor movements, and cognitive alterations (Chan, 2006). These embodied processes usually take place in a specific social and physical environments consisting of audience, religious objects, and non-verbal stimuli (e.g., chanting, music, and incense smells). A study on *dang-ki* healing provides an opportunity to understand the process of biolooping in the *dang-ki*'s self-transformation.

## Perceived Legitimacy of Mediumship and Shamanism

A successful transformation of spirit mediums and shamans is not just an intra-individual process, but also depends on whether their roles as healers are acceptable by their communities or not. If there is rejection of their roles, they cannot express their psychological states through the cultural idiom of possession. Previous research has shown that mediums and shamans have to prove their credentials according to their role expectations.

Mediumship and shamanism are not a matter of blind faith. People actively assess the healers' competency and the genuineness of their possession. Kaluli people in New Guinea scrutinize the shamans based on their success rates, the quality of the songs or voices they produce, and whether the possessing spirits speak about issues that they would not know (Schieffelin, 1996). In South Sulawesi of Indonesia (Graham, 2002), a *bissu* medium has to prove her possession by self-stabbing using a sacred *kris* (knife). If the *kris* does not penetrate her skin, she has proved her spirit possession and is allowed to offer blessing. However, if the *kris* penetrates, it may mean that she is not possessed or is possessed by a weak spirit. As a result, she is not allowed to offer blessing. Likewise, in Singapore (Elliott, 1955) and Taiwan (Sutton, 1990), ritual mortification often serves as evidence of spirit possession during which the god protects the *dang-ki* from pain and injury. In Korea, Kendall (1996) detailed how a young woman had attempted to become a shaman but did not succeed, as she failed to act like

a shaman. Wolf (1990) reported a woman who lived in a village in Taiwan, who tried hard to behave similarly to a possessing god–trembling, dancing, speaking in a male and strange voice, and making oracle-like statements–in order to convince her fellow villagers to recognize her as a *dang-ki*. However, some villagers questioned whether a god or a ghost really possessed her, or she suffered from mental disorders. Others suspected that her husband might want to use her as a source of income. Eventually, they rejected her credentials.

These examples suggest that clients may cast doubt on the spirit possession of mediums and shamans. There are cultural expectations, roles, and demands prescribed in shamanism and spirit mediumship. Healers who fail to meet these expectations are disqualified and rejected by their communities. Spirit possession can be conceptualized as social role enactment that aims at meeting social expectations (Spanos, 1994). However, to say that a medium or a shaman is enacting the role as a god does not mean that he is faking it, putting on a superficial act, or that he does not believe that he is a god incarnate. Rather, it may mean that he is highly absorbed in his divine role, and is enacting it with personal conviction. Thus, the important question is not whether the spirit possession is real, but whether the healer is able to fulfill a socially prescribed role. If his community endorses his ability, he achieves a sense of social integration.

Method

A Triangulation Approach to Interviews

Since I sought to elicit people's subjective experiences, I used interview as a main research method. I triangulated information by interviewing three main groups of informants: *dang-ki*, client, and temple assistant. This strategy allowed me to focus on the meanings of spirit possession. Meanings are intersubjective, linking different perspectives to facilitate

interactions among various social actors (Gillespie, 2010). A triangulating method also helps to explore the degrees of convergence or divergence across different perspectives.

It is important to interview the clients of *dang-ki*, without whom the healing session will not take place. Many of them are regular clients (Lee et al., 2010) who can provide useful information about their relationship with the god. Temple assistants, who were usually excluded in previous research, play important roles at the temple. They are the volunteers who help in running the temple, and handling a wide range of religious and administrative matters. During the healing sessions, they perform rituals, dispense queue numbers, assist the god in prescribing talismans, and help interpret the divine language when it is not comprehensible to the clients. Since many of them have known the *dang-ki* and the god for more than ten years, they provide insights into the *dang-ki*'s life history and personal development. The interviews with the clients and temple assistants help understand how people approve and disapprove of *dang-ki* healing.

I interviewed the *dang-ki*, both when he was possessed and not possessed, as the clients perceive the god and *dang-ki* as two separate beings. It is also interesting to explore how the *dang-ki*'s narratives would differ in different roles (*dang-ki* vs. god).

Participants

Twenty Chinese interviewees were drawn from a temple called *Xuan* Temple (pseudonym). They included one *dang-ki* (Master A), 10 assistants, and nine clients. Eleven were females, 18 were Taoists, and two were Buddhists, and their age ranged from 15 to 69 years. See Table 1 for their detailed demographic background.

Data Collection Procedure

The main reason for conducting research at *Xuan* Temple is that, compared with other temples, its members are more receptive to research. Master A, who is the head of the temple, allowed me to interview him, his god, the clients, and the assistants. He also allowed me to observe and video-record the healing sessions. *Dang-ki*s at other temples are usually suspicious of the researchers' motives. *Xuan* Temple offers consultations on a weekly basis with a regular stream of clients, and so provides a potential pool of research participants.

Over three months, I approached clients waiting for their consultation to invite them for an interview. Out of about 30 clients, nine agreed to participate. I interviewed each of them before their consultation on the same day. Out of the 14 assistants, 10 consented for interview. I conducted the interviews at a quiet place in the temple to ensure privacy, and minimize disturbances. I sequenced the interview sessions to minimize in-group influence, and interviewed the clients and assistants first, before interviewing the god who I could only do so in the shrine hall in the presence of the assistants. If the god were to be interviewed first, the god's responses might influence the subsequent interviews with the assistants. Since the interview with the god could only be held during the busy consultation day, the duration interviewed was shorter (about 20 minutes), and so, the amount of information from him was less than that from other interviewees. I interviewed the *dang-ki* lastly. I did this after three months to minimize the possible influence from my previous interview with him when he was possessed. I was unsure how much he was aware of while in possession even though he claimed to have post-possession amnesia.

The Interview Questionnaire

The questionnaire focused on the following areas:

1. How does Master A become a *dang-ki*?

2. How do Master A, assistants, and clients perceive the possessing god and their relationships with the god?

3. How do the possessing god, assistants, and clients perceive Master A and their relationships with him?

4. How do people know whether a god really possesses Master A?

5. What makes people consult Master A's god rather than gods at other temples?

6. When people seek help from a god, they can pray to the god's image or to consult the god through a *dang-ki*. How do these methods differ in fulfilling their needs?

Questions 1 through 3 explored Master A's transformative experience. Seligman (2005a) also asked her Brazilian mediums a question similar to Question 1. Questions 4 through 6 explored the perceived legitimacy of Master A's mediumship.

Data Analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded, and later transcribed verbatim by a research assistant. Among the 21 interviews (including the interview with Master A in spirit possession), 15 were conducted in Mandarin and six were in English. I analyzed the transcripts using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009). IPA helps to understand how a particular person (*dang-ki*, client, or assistant) perceives and makes sense of a particular phenomenon (spirit possession) in a particular context (religious setting). Whenever facing any ambiguity during the data analysis, I returned to the interviewees for clarification.

Results and Discussion

Becoming a *Dang-ki*

In 1969, Master A was born into a traditional family, in which he was the fourth child of ten children. His late father, besides working as a laborer to make ends meet, was also a *dang-ki* of a temple. Due to some interpersonal conflicts, his father left the temple in the 1970s, and set up his own *Xuan* Temple. They worshipped three main deities: the chief god *Xuan Tian Shang Di* (玄天上帝), and two subordinate gods *Zhong Tan Yuan Shuai* (中壇元帥), and *Shan Cai Tong Zi* (善財童子; a male child god). His father was the *dang-ki* of the chief god. The young Master A was not interested in religion, and often defied his parents' orders to participate in rituals, including the gods' birthdays. In his early teen years, he frequently ran away from home, did not perform well in school, became a secret society member, and took part in gang fights. Since his youth, he had intense and uncontrollable anger, resulting in frequent displays of temper and physical fights.

At the age of 16, he witnessed two traumatic events. One of his best friends died in a violent gang fight which got him arrested and put on probation. After these incidents, he encountered his first possession experience. One day, when the chief god was providing consultation, and he was chatting with some people outside the shrine, he suddenly fainted. When he woke up, he found himself in the shrine hall. People told him that *Shan Cai Tong Zi* had possessed him, and wanted him to be a *dang-ki*. He had no recollection of his possession experience, and did not take it seriously. Subsequently, he served as an ad hoc *dang-ki* for *Shan Cai Tong Zi* while the chief god continued as the main consulting deity. Even after becoming a *dang-ki*, the young Master A was still mischievous, and took his role lightly. He had no faith in his god.

Turning Point

When he was about 23, he joined a gang and worked as a loan shark, leading a life of debauchery. One night, *Shan Cai Tong Zi* appeared in his dream, and sternly warned him that

if he continued to take part in illegal activities, he would be jailed and his family would fall

apart. On hearing that, he became so scared that he promised to turn over a new leaf. This

was the turning point of his life. He slipped into poverty after quitting from the network of

loan sharks. He was so poor that he had only seventy cents when his daughter was born.

However, he refused to give her away for adoption. He decided to change for the sake of his

god and family. He told me that as a spokesperson of the god, he had to change; otherwise,

the reputation of *Shan Cai Tong Zi* would suffer. The clients would question how the god was

able to help others when not being able to change his own *dang-ki*. Besides withdrawing from

the secret society and loan sharking, the most prominent change in him was his temperament

and uncontrollable anger. He said:

> "[The god] has changed me in many ways... I used to have a hot temper and a poor
> sense of punctuality. I was impulsive, not open to people's advice. Under the god's
> teaching, I gradually improved myself and gained insight into life problems. I treat the
> temple as my school and the god as my teacher. I've applied what he has taught me to
> help other people. I'm still practicing what I've learned. I am completely different from
> what I was… I learned to be composed, thrifty and punctual… I learned to accept
> suffering as part of life. Unlike other people, I don't glorify how good I was. I share
> how bad I used to be. This helps me to reflect on myself and let others know me better.
> I would not be what I am today if I didn't have such a notorious past."

In dreams, *Shan Cai Tong Zi* taught him to restrain himself, endure hardship, and

tolerate everything in life. The god used many metaphors in teaching. In one dream, he

advised Master A to learn from the lotus: "Although lotus grows in dirty mud, it still looks

beautiful and has an alluring smell." The god likened this unique quality of the lotus to the

noble characteristics of those people who were able to stick to their moral values despite

living in a corrupt environment. The god told him that evil spirits may come to disturb during

his training. However, if he were able to maintain an inner peace, he would be free from their

interference. The god taught him to meditate, and to constantly reflect on himself.

For Master A, changing one's character requires one's effort in cultivation. He did not

think that just because the god had chosen him to be a *dang-ki*, he would automatically attain

enlightenment. Although it is the god who offers healing services by borrowing a *dang-ki*'s body, it does not mean that the *dang-ki*'s role is limited to this function. *Dang-ki*s must personally cultivate to attain enlightenment. Master's A view on spiritual training is different from Chan's (2006) proposition that a *dang-ki* is only trained as a vessel for the god. Chan likened the *dang-ki* to be a passive puppet controlled by an external force. However, the image of a *dang-ki* delineated by Master A is an active agent involved in personal cultivation, not simply a tool of the god. Some of the *dang-ki*s that DeBernardi (2006) interviewed also emphasized self-cultivation, and the philosophical aspects of the Chinese religions.

The assistants who had known Master A since he was young or had worked closely with him noticed the change in him after he became a *dang-ki*, particularly in his temper. He became more composed and compassionate. In the eyes of the assistants and clients, he has many positive traits. He is helpful, kind-hearted, friendly, empathetic, humble, calm, fair, and respectful to other people, generous, intelligent, and a fast learner. His current disposition is a far cry from his previous angry and impulsive character. Although this case study did not assess Master A's mental status, he appeared to be logical, stable, and coherent during the interview. He is able to work with different people, manage a big temple, and has many interpersonal qualifies based on the clients' feedback. If he were clinically distressed, he would be socially impaired.

By becoming a *dang-ki*, Master A is reintegrated back to his family and community that he was alienated from due to his past disposition and delinquency. A psychological integration would not succeed without having integration with society. Through this role resolution of psychological conflict (Obeyesekere, 1981), his previous identity as a gangster and a loan shark was reconstituted into a new self-identity as a *dang-ki* (see Seligman, 2014).

Although Master A claimed his changes were due to his god's teaching and spiritual cultivation, the interviews also revealed three interrelated themes that may further explain his transformation. First, there is a relationship between the perceived legitimacy of his spirit possession and self-transformation. Because his clients and community have accepted his spirit possession as genuine, and recognized the healing power of his possessing god, he is able to make use of the mediumship as an avenue for spiritual development. Second, he has developed his spirituality by internalizing his god's positive traits (e.g., compassion). Finally, his self-transformation may run parallel to his god's transformation. In Chinese religions, gods have to constantly develop their spirituality even though they are already gods. An understanding of the god's spiritual development further sheds light on the *dang-ki*'s self-transformation.

<div align="center">Self-Transformation and Perceived Legitimacy of *Dang-ki* Healing</div>

Cultural Meaning of Spontaneous Possession

From a psychological perspective, the sight of his best friend who was violently killed in a gang fight and his own arrest may be too traumatic for a teenager to cope with. These traumatic experiences may result in Master A's dissociative state. However, rather than viewing this dissociation as pathological, his community attributed it to a divine possession. Why is this divine rather than evil possession? It is because the possession occurred in the shrine, a scared place. Before a *dang-ki* is possessed, the shrine hall has to be ritually cleansed to prevent the intrusion of uninvited spirits, and to protect the *dang-ki* from being possessed by malevolent spirits. As such, the spirit speaking through the young Master A must be a legitimate deity. The source of possession is more ambiguous if it takes place elsewhere, such as at home or in public areas. Thus, attribution and situational context play vital roles in defining whether a dissociative experience is pathological or a possession is

demonic. Although Master A had no recollection of his possession, his community convinced him that a deity had possessed him. The cultural idiom of spirit possession was created, recreated, and reinforced through shared narratives.

Not only was his dissociative experience socially interpreted as divine possession, it was also considered a favorable form of initiation, because it happened spontaneously. I asked Master A and other interviewees why the god had wanted him to be a *dang-ki*. There are two ways to become a *dang-ki*: *koan-ki* (關乩) or *liak-ki* (抓乩). In *koan-ki*, a person volunteers and trains as a medium under a senior *dang-ki*. He has to learn to solicit a specific deity to possess him. In *liak-ki*, a person is chosen by a god, and becomes a *dang-ki* against his will. A spontaneous and unsolicited possession, as in Master A's case (the faint at the temple), is the sign of *liak-ki*. Master A was chosen for three reasons. First, he and his possessing god have *yuan* (緣), meaning a predestined relationship (Sun, 2012). Second, Master A has to fulfill a sacred mission. He has to continue his incomplete spiritual training in his previous life under the god's guidance. Third, he has a divine body that provides a spiritual condition or physical structure, which is suitable for divine possession (see Chan, 2006).[3]

As a chosen one, Master A is considered more credible than the volunteer *dang-ki*s. *Yuan*, sacred mission and divine body are only found in the chosen *dang-ki*s, and not in the volunteer *dang-ki*s. Thus the latter do not have a strong affinity with their gods as shown in their weaker healing power and unstable possession. They take a longer time to be possessed, and their gods often abruptly leave their bodies. Conversely, the chosen *dang-ki*s can

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[3] As compared with the initiation pathways of spirit mediums and shamans in other cultures, Master A's is less dramatic. A god chose him and he started his service as a *dang-ki* without much training. He only began his spiritual training after becoming a *dang-ki*. In other cultures, spirit mediums and shamans embark on their spiritual training in order to become healers. They undergo a series of elaborate rituals; report intense visionary experiences in terms of soul journey, interacting with spirits, death, and rebirth (Eliade, 1964); learn to use drums and to compose their own shamanistic songs (Siikala, 1987); or are temporarily separated from their usual social contexts (Seligman, 2005a).

communicate with their gods through dreams, and their possession is much smoother. Hence, *koan-ki* is a less credible initiation pathway than *liak-ki*. Many interviewees have scorned the volunteer *dang-ki*s, because they became a medium for seeking attention rather than for altruism and spiritual attainment. Master A said:

> "A lot of my nephews, after seeing me in possession, all want to be a *dang-ki* … They are amazed by the rituals whereby gods are summoned to enter the *dang-ki*s' bodies, and by how the gods and *dang-ki*s have drawn a big crowd of followers. So they treat us like a celebrity worshipped by fans….."

Since *dang-ki*s (including Master A) mostly come from working classes (Elliott, 1955; Heinze, 1997), they may get psychologically and socially empowered by becoming a medium. However, social marginality (Lewis, 1989) is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for making a *dang-ki*. Ethnographic studies have shown that spirit mediums are not necessarily marginal members of the societies (Masquelier, 2001), and many marginal members do not resort to spirit mediumship as a means to enhance their social status (Seligman, 2005b).

Hence, only when a person's dissociative experience is socially recognized as a divine possession will he be able to enter mediumship for spiritual development and social integration. By contrast, if his dissociative experience is socially interpreted as a mental disorder, he may be brought to a psychiatrist. His diagnosis may be unintelligible to his community, which only enables communication among fellow professionals (see Obeyesekere, 1981). Due to the stigma of psychiatric diagnosis, his community may label him as sick and reject him. As a patient, he may even internalize the negative representation of the diagnosis, and suffer from social isolation and low self-esteem. He has to cope with his estrangement, as he is disconnected from his self and community (see Obeyesekere, 1981).

Although Master A's initial possession is socially approved, his clients further scrutinize his mediumship during the possession rituals and healing sessions.

Possession Rituals and Transformation of the Embodied Self

Similar to the Sri Lankan priestess (Chapin, 2008; Obeyesekere, 1981, 1990), Master A has established a sense of control over his possession trance, moving from a spontaneous to a voluntary possession induced by rituals at a particular time (consultation) and place (shrine). The highly structured and regimented rituals have helped in placing his initial spontaneous possession under control. The *dang-ki*'s possession has to be performed according to specific rituals, time, and place. Deities cannot be invited to enter the medium's body without a legitimate purpose, such as consultation or ritual performance. Hence, his possession is obviously different from the involuntary, uncontrollable, and unsolicited nature of a pathological possession trance (see Ng, 2000).

The rituals of spirit possession, which are a standard performance script observed across temples (Chan, 2006; DeBernardi, 2006; Huang, 2004), fully reflect the role enactment of a god. To publicly perform these rituals is to demonstrate to the audience that a god properly and genuinely possesses Master A. Since the *dang-ki*'s body is intensively involved in the rituals of possession, clients assess the genuineness of his spirit possession through various aspects of his embodiment: bodily cleansing, gestures, motor movements, facial expression, physical appearance, and post-possession memory.

Before his possession ritual in the evening, Master A has to purify himself by abstaining from sex and alcohol, and following vegetarian diet. He has to bathe and fast after noon. He observes these practices to ensure that his body is clean enough for his god to enter. On one occasion, his god failed to enter his body because he had forgotten to bathe.

At the shrine hall, his assistants help prepare the consultation table (e.g., talismans and stationery), and cleanse the place with a ritual whip. When the possession ritual starts, Master A sits in a divine throne before the main altar. His assistants chant, summon divine soldiers to

guard the sacred place, and invite the god to descend from the heaven. To prevent evil spirits or unauthorized deities from entering his body, he and *Shan Cai Tong Zi* share a "secret password." He was tight-lipped about it for the fear that some passing-by spirits may eavesdrop on our conversation.

There are physical manifestations when the god is about to enter Master A's body. He vomits to cleanse his body, as *Shan Cai Tong Zi* likes cleanliness. Ms T said: "Vomiting shows that it is a real god. Some *dang-ki*s don't vomit and go into possession too fast… I don't quite believe this kind of *dang-ki*s." His head also turns, eyes roll back, and feet shake. The clients believed that the god must induce these extensive and repetitive movements, as it was impossible for a human to maintain these movements for more than a few minutes. Master A then moves faster before coming to a sudden halt in a lotus sitting position on his throne to signal the complete possession by the god. The temple assistants clothe him with a stomacher, a lozenge-shaped bib tied with a string around the neck and the waist. It bears the name of his god. Master A is also given a pacifier to imbibe, as *Shan Cai Tong Zi* is a child god. Stomacher and pacifier are powerful physical indicators, visually communicating to the audience that the being they consult now is the god rather than the *dang-ki*.

Since the *dang-ki* and the god are two different beings, any changes to Master A's behavior will suggest that he is truly possessed by *Shan Cai Tong Zi*. He sucks his thumb and pacifier, shoots jokes, laughs, smiles, and would speak like a small boy. Ms H said: "When *Shan Cai Tong Zi* is talking to you, Master A's eyes squint; after the god leaves, Master A's eyes open." When a *dang-ki*'s eyes are open or voice remains unchanged, his possession is perceived as bogus. A real god is capable of doing things that a human is not capable of. For example, despite closing his eyes, he is able to write magical words on talismans, read palm, examine pulse, and use a fine Chinese brush to point at the small space between the eyebrows

of a tiny *Guan Yin* (觀音) pendant for blessings. A real god also has strange eating habits. Ms Q recalled: "… once he ate and swallowed the whole lychee with seed. When a real god comes, he eats everything… whatever things you offer." However, Master A will not have indigestion later, as *Shan Cai Tong Zi* takes the food he has eaten to the heaven. That is why Master A often feels hungry after the possession no matter how much the god has eaten.

When the *dang-ki's* behavior changes according to the characteristics of the possessing gods, the changes are indicative of a genuine spirit possession. The clients shared their observations on other *dang-ki*s to substantiate their claims. For example, a young *dang-ki* became hunched, and spoke similarly to an old man when possessed by an elderly deity, an elegant *dang-ki* turned into an uncouth person when possessed by a warrior deity, and an uncouth *dang-ki* became gentle when possessed by a scholar deity. These bodily states may be the effects of cognitive processes. Social psychological experiments have demonstrated how embodied effects come about, for example, activating the elderly stereotype caused research participants to walk slowly (see review by Barsalou, 2008).[4] In the case of Master A, activating the stereotype of a young child causes him to suck a pacifier and behave similarly to a child. Conversely, bodily states also influence cognitive processes. Since religious rituals usually involve bodily actions and sensory experiences, they can produce corresponding mental states, including memory, ideas, imageries, and emotions (Barsalou, Barbey, Simmons, and Santos, 2005; Norris, 2005). Inducing a still body in meditation, for example, triggers a stilling and calm effect on the mind. In the case of Master A, the rituals of purification (sexual abstinence, vegetarian diet, and vomiting), repetitive motor movements, and postures (a lotus sitting position) are not simply performances but are also able to activate the mental representation of *Shan Cai Tong Zi* who is a pure, composed, and wise

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[4] These experiments had been ingeniously designed to ensure that participants were unaware of the hypotheses being tested.

child god. These embodiments are not random but are culturally prescribed for eliciting the desired state of spirit possession. They are cultural and public, because they make sense to the clients as the indicators of a genuine divine possession.

Post-possession amnesia is another embodied effect related to the client perceptions of the *dang-ki*'s legitimacy. Master A is still conscious of when the god is about to descend. After the god enters his body, he becomes unconscious. He claimed that he had chosen not to be conscious, preferring his god to fully take charge of the consultation. In other words, he can choose to remember or forget his possession experience, suggesting that he has a certain degree of controllability. At the end of the consultation, the god signals to the assistants that he is leaving. After the god's departure, Master A collapses in his throne, and has to rely on his assistants to perform rituals to wake him up. He claimed to have no recollection about the possession.

Previous research has shown that post-possession amnesia is common in spirit possession, and may serve several functions. First, clients are firmly convinced that if a spirit possession is real, the *dang-ki* should not be aware of anything when a god fully replaces him (DeBernardi, 2006). In this case study, the interviewees disagreed on the nature of this replacement. Some of them believed that Master A's soul had travelled to another realm whereas others thought that he was asleep in his body or his soul was still in his body, but inactive. *Shan Cai Tong Zi* clarified that Master A's soul was still inside his body, but inactive and asleep. A god could not function in a soulless body. However, some *dang-ki*s that Chan (2006) interviewed claimed to be aware of their possession experience, but refused to reveal their experience for the fear of losing their gift of mediumship. Since we can only rely on the *dang-ki*s' own reports, and there is no objective way to find out whether they are indeed conscious or unconscious, it is more useful to view post-possession amnesia as a role

that *dang-ki*s are eager to maintain (see Krippner, 2004). Thus, Master A "must not remember."

Second, Master A's amnesia helps protect privacy and confidentiality, as the being that the clients confide in is *Shan Cai Tong Zi,* and not the *dang-ki*. Some clients request a private one-to-one session with the god without the presence of assistants. They may assume that no one except *Shan Cai Tong Zi* would then know about their problems.

In summary, the transformation of the *dang-ki*'s self during his possession ritual is fundamentally embodied. Besides the possession rituals, the perceived legitimacy of *dang-ki* healing is related to the god's healing power.

Demonstration of Divine and Healing Power

Before spirit possession, Master A avoids interacting with clients to prevent them from accidentally divulging their issues to him. This is a useful strategy. During the consultation, if the god knows their problems even before they speak, the clients will be convinced that he is a real god, as they have not revealed their issues to the *dang-ki*. A real god demonstrates his power by reading people's minds. Ms R commented, "… When *Shan Cai Tong Zi* accurately points out what you're thinking, you may wonder how he could know your inner thoughts… the details about your problem. He knows so many things about my past. I don't think a fake god is capable of doing that." The god's ability in remote reading amazed Ms L: "When I mumbled about something at home or was worried about something at work, he knew. But nobody has entered or bugged my house and office! How could he know that? That's why I truly believe in him."

Similarly, New Guinea's shamans have to demonstrate their competency by knowing what a human would not know (Schieffelin, 1996). In my previous study on *dang-ki* healing

(Lee et al., 2010), some clients believed that their gods were able to understand them through telepathic communication. This divine power evoked their faith, which, in turn, led to their positive healing experiences. The effect of telepathic communication may be due to the clients' selective perception by which they remembered only the accurate, and not the inaccurate parts of the god's response. The perceived power of mind and remote reading may also be the result of the extensive healing experience of Master A who has been a *dang-ki* for 30 years. Since most of his visitors are regular clients, he may have established a good knowledge of their personalities and issues.

I asked the interviewees whether the consultation with a god through *dang-ki* had a different outcome, compared with praying to a god's image. All interviewees, except for Master A, preferred consultation because of its interactive nature. The two-way communication during consultation enables the clients to ask questions and have their questions answered. They feel more secure, and can immediately act on the god's advice. Praying to the god's image is limited. They said: "The statue you pray to won't answer you," "I feel more real when talking to the god directly," and "Prayer is not that reassuring… it is like one-way traffic (laughs)… there is no reply, just like sending an SMS to nowhere." By directly communicating with the god, the clients feel closer to the deity. As mentioned, people from working classes are unlikely to seek Western psychotherapy for mental health care. The interactive nature of *dang-ki* resembles psychotherapy, providing them with an alternate source of support.

These narratives also suggest that the god's power is reflected in his ability to solve his clients' problems. If he lacks this capability, they consider his power inadequate, and he would lose all his clients. Healing outcome is an important criterion for assessing the god's credibility and competency. Clients usually do not return if they are dissatisfied with their gods' services (Heinze, 1997; Kleinman and Sung, 1979). They move from one temple to

another when their needs are not met (DeBernardi, 2006). This pragmatic attitude (Finkler 2004) reflects the possible connection between *dang-ki* healing and consumer capitalism. Kendall (2009) maintains that Korean shamanism has survived over time because it has adapted to the changing needs of the consumer society of South Korea. Most of the shamans' clients sponsor rituals to improve their businesses, financial condition, and career prospects. In return, the possessing spirits demand various commodities, including money, clothing, and food. Similarly, Chan (2006) observes that the changes in worshipping certain *dang-ki*s' gods in Singapore reflect the changing socioeconomic needs of the clients. Since the late 1980s, two spirits of wealth have become popular, as they can give clients lucky lottery numbers. To please them, clients offer liquor, beer, food, and cigarettes. People from working classes are particularly drawn to these two spirits of wealth due to their financial predicaments. However, *Shan Cai Tong Zi* does not encourage his clients to consult him on lucky lottery numbers. Although he occasionally helps them on matters related to business and career prospects, he emphasizes dharma teaching and spiritual training. He often tells his assistants not to ask clients for money. The healing sessions at the *Xuan* temple are free. Its daily operation depends on unsolicited donations. In this regard, *Shan Cai Tong Zi* is not the same as the "greedy gods" described in Kendall's (2009) study. In a religious market place, different deities play different functions to meet different needs. Clients seek material wealth from certain gods, and spiritual advice from others.

<div align="center">Internalization of the God's Positive Traits</div>

As mentioned, Master A has actively involved in spiritual cultivation. His clients and assistants attested to the changes in his characters after he became a *dang-ki*. Such changes may be due to the long-term internalization of his god's positive traits. This internalization has influenced the *dang-ki* not just during possession rituals, but has generalized to all aspects of his life as a person.

Deities worshipped in *dang-ki* healing are mainly derived from Taoism and Buddhism. They possess positive traits admired by Chinese people, for example, loyalty, filial piety, compassion, justice, benevolence, valor, and high moral principles (Chan, 2006). Many Taoist deities were historical figures that were deified due to their noble characters (Peng, 2014). Likewise, among the bodhisattvas in Buddhism, *Avalokitasvara* is perceived to be compassionate; *Manjusri* to be wise and perseverant; and *Samantabhadra* to be kind, patient, and forbearing (Guan Ming, 1985). Therefore, deities may serve as role models and inspiration for spiritual cultivation.

Seligman (2010) reported how a Brazilian medium had reshaped her personality around the characteristics of her possessing deity who was calm, wise, kind, and tranquil. Before becoming a medium, she was high-strung, sensitive, and emotionally volatile; however, afterwards, she became tranquil. The medium had internalized and identified with the qualities of her possessing god.[5]

Similarly, the positive traits of *Shan Cai Tong Zi* may have influenced Master A's transformation. The legends of this god will help understand how this may come about. There are three versions about his origin (Ma, 2011). First, he was given the name *Shan Cai* or "wealth" because many precious gems mysteriously appeared when he was born. However, he despised material goods, and was more determined in the quest for truth. Following *Manjusri*'s advice, he undertook a long pilgrimage to learn from 53 wise and virtuous teachers. He was enlightened and became a bodhisattva. In the second version, *Shan Cai Tong Zi* was an orphan leading an ascetic life on a mountain. He became the disciple of the

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[5] Research on digital self-representation has found that the characteristics of an avatar can shape how a user behaves both inside and outside of a collaborative virtual environment (Yee, Bailenson, and Ducheneaut, 2009). Although there are many differences between virtual reality and spirit possession in mediumship, the notion that role-playing can be used to learn new behaviors or attitudes may partly explain how the qualities of the god shape the transformation of the medium. In fact, some researchers (Spanos, 1994) have interpreted spirit possession as a form of social role enactment.

Bodhisattva *Guanyin* after passing her test. In the third version, *Shan Cai Tong Zi* was featured as a wicked child demon called Red Boy in the Chinese classical novel *Journey to the West*. The Bodhisattva *Guanyin* subdued him, and he became her disciple.

Based on these legends, the positive traits of *Shan Cai Tong Zi* encompass a quest for wisdom and enlightenment, forgoing material goods, compassion, and transformation from bad to good (i.e., from an evil Red Boy to a Buddhist *Sudhana*). The *Shan Cai Tong Zi* who possesses Master A also has similar traits. The interviewees passionately called him a god of wisdom who was altruistic and detested materialism. They learned from the god about life and suffering. *Shan Cai Tong Zi* told me that his actual monastic title was *Shan Zhi* (善智) not *Shan Cai* (善財). *Zhi* means "wisdom," whereas *cai* means "wealth." *Shan Cai* is a common name, labeling him as a god of fortune. However, he prefers teaching people dharma rather than helping them make money. He values self-reliance, and describes those clients who overly rely on him as superstitious. As such, the *Shan Cai Tong Zi* that Master A serves is likely to represent the first or second version. Interestingly, Master A's transformation resembles the Red Boy by which he changed from a "bad guy" (gangster) to a "good guy" (a spiritual *dang-ki*).

As a god incarnate, Master A has to conform to the traits of *Shan Cai Tong Zi* that clients would expect the god to present. By immersing in the role of a god for 30 years, he may have internalized the god's attributes. Master A said that he had learned to deal with hardships with a greater calm and insights after becoming a *dang-ki*. Since his emotional conflicts are centered on anger and hot temper while *Shan Cai Tong Zi* is composed, he gains compensation for shortcomings in his disposition through spirit possession. The clients and assistants praised him for his composure, patience, wisdom, and friendliness. Hence, the spirit possession of *dang-ki* is a form of spiritual training rather than pathological dissociation.

Master A also found a resemblance between his face and the god's image over time, suggesting that the internalization takes place at both psychological and physical dimensions. The cognitive-discursive and embodied aspects of the self are mutually reconstructed in the transformative experience of Master A, which are manifested during and outside the possession rituals.

Further research should be conducted on various gods who have different attributes that may bring out diverse transformative experiences in their *dang-ki*s. For example, a *dang-ki* may develop the qualities of "loyalties" and "righteousness" when possessed by *Guan Di* (關帝; a deified ancient general), whereas another *dang-ki* may develop "fairness," "honesty," or "integrity" when possessed by *Bao Gong* (包公; a deified ancient judge).

Hence, the pantheon of deities worshipped in *dang-ki* healing are, in essence, the pantheon of ideal selves representing a wide range of positive traits and moral values promoted in Chinese culture. Ideal self means the person one wants to be (Rogers, 1959). It is dynamic, consisting of one's goals and ambition in life. Since the transformation of *dang-ki* is related to the self, the possession of a deity is an embodiment of an ideal self. This process of embodiment is different from that in demonic possession in which demons have to be expelled and *disintegrated* from the host through deliverance (see Csordas, 2002). By contrast, since the possession in *dang-ki* healing is of divine origin, the *integration* with the deity (or ideal self) is culturally sanctioned. This cultural form of integration between human and divine selves is in line with what Kirmayer (2007) called "cosmocentric self," meaning that humans are inseparable from divine and ancestral spirits. In Western psychology, spirit possession is a form of pathological dissociation because the self is viewed as unified, and the spirit does not exist. However, in *dang-ki* healing, spirit possession is not dissociation but integration, that is, between the human and the divine force.

Transformation of the Possessing Deity

Previous researchers (Chapin, 2008; Obeyesekere, 1981, 1990) usually focused on the mediums' and shamans' transformation rather than on their possessing gods', reflecting the different concepts of god across cultures. Gods in Chinese religions, particularly those of a lower rank, have to constantly develop their spirituality even though they are already gods (Xiu-Ci, 2009). An understanding of their spiritual development can further shed light on the mechanisms that cultural meanings play in the *dang-ki*'s transformation.

The consultation at the *Xuan* Temple had been directed by the chief god through Master A's father until 1990 when the chief god formally handled over the divine services to *Shan Cai Tong Zi*, Master A's possessing god. This change of divine appointment was solemnly performed at a temple of Jade Emperor (玉皇大帝), the supreme god in Taoism. Through this ceremony, *Shan Cai Tong Zi* was recognized as a healer in both the divine and human worlds. Even though *Xuan Tian Shang Di* has remained as a chief god, the new appointment raised the status of *Shan Cai Tong Zi,* who was now given the authority to perform healing sessions. One of his achievements was expelling the plague god during the outbreak of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome in 2002. Master A said that *Shan Cai Tong Zi* evolved after each successful mission:

> "A god can upgrade himself just like a student after completing a course of study. *Shan Cai Tong Zi* is different from what he was previously. In the past, people were under the impression that he was playful and not serious about his work because he always ate during consultation. Now, he only eats after consultation.[6] He has developed after completing each mission, such as his IQ. Previously, he seldom preached during consultation. But now, he teaches and guides people… His teaching is very profound."

*Shan Cai Tong Zi* behaved similarly to a naïve new born in his early years. Over the years, he has become more mature and sophisticated in helping people, and handling temple

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[6] Food is usually offered to the god (not to the *dang-ki*) at the end of each healing session. Since *Shan Cai Tong Zi* is a child god, offerings are usually soft drink, ice-cream, fruits, or candy.

issues, including managing conflicts among the assistants. Ms N who has consulted *Shan Cai Tong Zi* for more than 20 years noticed the god's transformation over time:

> "In the past, he spoke simple language that we could easily understand. But nowadays I don't quite understand what he says… He does not directly tell you what he means. You've to pick up the hidden message yourself. So I think his standard has risen… He speaks like a high-ranking god, using idioms and proverbs … in fewer words."

Taken together, the promotion of *Shan Cai Tong Zi* to the main consulting deity simultaneously raises Master A's social status from a junior to a senior *dang-ki*. Second, when the god successfully completes divine missions, this also means that Master A is competent in ritual performance. Third, Master A's spiritual attainment has enhanced over time as shown in his god's dharma teaching and use of classical idioms during healing sessions. Thus, the transformations of the god and the *dang-ki* mutually reinforce each other. From Obeyesekere's (1990) perspective, this mutual influence suggests that the relationship between personal experience and culture is bidirectional, as personal and cultural symbols are the same meaning system. Changes in personal experience lead to changes of cultural meanings and vice versa. Meaning, whether it is operating at the personal or cultural level, is dynamic and changeable over time.

Conclusion

This case study provides initial evidence that involvement in the *dang-ki* mediumship is transformative. The *dang-ki*'s transformation is achieved through the culturally guided reconstruction of the embodied self in a spiritual context. He and his community interpreted his first dissociative experience as a divine possession and an initiation of mediumship. In his subsequent spirit possession rituals, he engages in a series of bodily practices such as bodily cleansing (abstaining from sex and alcohol), vomiting, motor movements (e.g., turning his head), wearing a stomacher that bears the god's name, behaving according to his god's characteristics, and post-possession amnesia. In turn, these bodily practices shape his

subsequent embodiments, knowledge, learning, and interactions with others as a medium. This feed-forward or looping process (Seligman, 2014) is not simply circularity but is developmental. The *dang-ki* has progressively actualized his potentials by internalizing his deity's positive traits that reflect the qualities of an ideal self in Chinese culture. As a result, Master A established a new self-identity, evolving from an impulsive gangster to a compassionate *dang-ki*. The internalization of the divine traits has also shaped his bodily qualities so that his gestures, actions, and movements resemble his deity during the spirit possession. His clients perceive this resemblance as an indication of a genuine possession. In turn, this perceived legitimacy reinforces his subsequent behaviors and bodily qualities. He has to continuously cultivate his spiritual self so as to serve his god and to meet the social expectations.

Taken together, the *dang-ki*'s transformation is carried out through an interaction between mind, body, cultural meanings, and social expectations. His transformation cannot be fully understood without understanding the perceived legitimacy of his mediumship. If his community were skeptical of his divine possession, and his god's abilities in meeting people's needs, he would lose his clients, and cannot take up the role as a *dang-ki*. Perceived legitimacy plays a significant role in *dang-ki*s' transformation because *dang-ki* mediumship is a performance-based healing system. An audience of devotees is needed for the divine services and ritual performance. As mentioned, *dang-ki* healing may have difficulty in attracting members when competing with organized religions, particularly Christianity. To survive, *dang-ki* healing has to sustain its credibility among its clients.

Despite its therapeutic potentials, *dang-ki* healing is only recognized by a small group of Chinese Singaporeans. Not all Singaporeans, including the ethnic Chinese, are receptive to this form of spiritual practice, as Singapore is a multiethnic and multireligious society where diverse and conflicting beliefs co-exist. *Dang-ki* healing does not provide a role resolution of

psychological conflict for everyone who is prone to spirit possession. Nonbelievers, such as Christians or Muslims, are more likely to explain possession experience as demonic instead of divine, and so may resort to exorcism or other religious interventions. They may also explain dissociative experiences with another cultural idiom–psychiatric diagnosis–and receive medical interventions.

Findings from this study have to be interpreted with caution due to several methodological limitations. First, this case study focuses on only one *dang-ki* whose experiences may not be generalized to other *dang-ki*s. Second, clients and temple assistants interviewed may not be representatives of all members of the *Xuan* temple. Skeptics may decline to be interviewed whereas those who agreed to be interviewed may give positive responses for the fear of offending the deities, *dang-ki*, and other temple members. To elicit more honest responses, perhaps interviews may be conducted outside the temple compound or anonymous questionnaires could be used in future research. More representative data can be collected by involving clients from other temples, as the practice of *dang-ki* may vary across temples (Chan, 2006; DeBernardi, 2006). Finally, the interviewees' statements are based on their recollection, particularly with reference to Master A's life history. A longitudinal study with a *dang-ki* may provide a more accurate picture of his transformation over time.

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Table 1

*Demographic Background of Participants*

| Interviewee | Gender | Age | Education | Marital Status | Occupation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | *Dang-ki* | | |
| Master A | Male | 43 | Secondary | Married | Full-time *dang-ki*, part-time geomancer |
| | | | Temple Assistant | | |
| Ms. B | Female | 69 | Secondary | Single | Clerk |
| Mr. C | Male | 58 | Secondary | Married | Tour guide |
| Mr. D | Male | 48 | Secondary | Married | Self-employed |
| Ms. E | Female | 53 | Secondary | Married | Homemaker |
| Mr. F | Male | 43 | Primary | Single | Technician |
| Mr. G | Male | 23 | Diploma | Single | Self-employed |
| Mr. H | Female | 55 | Secondary | Married | Manager |
| Mr. I | Male | 15 | Secondary | Single | Student |
| Mr. J | Male | 22 | Diploma | Single | Undergraduate |
| Ms. K | Female | 35 | Diploma | Married | Sales |
| | | | Client | | |
| Ms. L | Female | 54 | Secondary | Married | Clerk |
| Mr. M | Male | 46 | Secondary | Married | Technician |
| Ms. N | Female | 55 | Secondary | Single | Unemployed |
| Ms. O | Female | 41 | Secondary | Married | Clerk |
| Mr. P | Male | 34 | Diploma | Married | Technician |

| Ms. Q | Female | 47 | Secondary | Married | Homemaker |
| Ms. R | Female | 38 | Secondary | Single | Packer |
| Ms. S | Female | 56 | Secondary | Married | Homemaker |
| Ms. T | Female | 43 | Primary | Married | Homemaker |