Magic Tricks, Midnight Grave Outings, and Transforming Trees: Performance and Agency in Taiwanese Religion

Marc L. Moskowitz, University of South Carolina

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/marc_moskowitz/8/
MAGIC TRICKS, MIDNIGHT GRAVE OUTINGS, AND TRANSFORMING TREES:
PERFORMANCE AND AGENCY IN TAIWANESE RELIGION

Marc L. Moskowitz
Lake Forest College

Abstract

This article examines the rise and fall of a Daoist master in southern Taiwan. It is divided into three sections: 1) an account of a day and a night spent with the Daoist Master, 2) follow-up interviews with one of his patrons in which she becomes disillusioned with the master, and 3) an analysis of ritual as moral fantasy and individual agency. In the third section I address the factors that made the religious master successful and the events that eventually led to his downfall. I also argue that the performative nature of religious ritual adds to the worshipper’s sense of individual agency, thus placing her or him in a moral fantasy in which that person becomes the hero of a created drama. This, I suggest, emphasizes some of the more individualistic elements of Chinese religious belief and practice that have not fully been explored (1).

I. An Adventure

In September of 1996 I arrived at a temple in southern Taiwan, escorted by Mrs. Li who was introducing me to a Daoist master she had told me about in an earlier interview. Her mother and several of her nieces and nephews accompanied us.

When the temple master arrived at noon he was nothing like I had expected him to be. In his mid-forties, he had dyed jet-black hair. His face was boyish, with round gentle eyes. He was short but seemed a bit shorter because he slouched and his stocky upper body was perched on top of stubby legs. Basically, he looked like a big good-natured teddy bear. It was not his appearance that struck me, however, but his manner—the man had seemingly unlimited energy. Far from presenting himself as an aloof priest who had withdrawn from the world in contemplation, he acted more like a fraternity brother looking for his next party. Later, when I was to write of him in a different context (Moskowitz 2001) I would call him Daoist Master Bob.

That day I watched Daoist Master Bob cure two infants and phone network to get a local hoodlum transferred from prison to a drug rehabilitation clinic. After they left, Daoist Master Bob played a videotape for us that showed his temple denoting bags of rice and cooking oil to the poor. Mrs. Li whispered to me that many government officials asked for his help in elections and that rumor had it that he was very close to the then president Li Teng-Hui and many government officials in the national legislature (Lifayuan) — a statement that seems highly improbable because his temple was quite small and was located in the south of Taiwan rather than in the nation’s capital in the north.

That night, when we returned to the temple, Daoist Master Bob took out an empty cardboard box and had us look to see that nothing was inside. He then took out a red cloth and had us check it to make sure that there was nothing hidden in this either. After this he put five religious instruments in the box, said a prayer, and covered it with the red cloth. Then we waited.

Teacher A, who worked at Mrs. Li’s family’s nursery school, had joined us. It was she who had introduced Mrs. Li to Daoist Master Bob. Teacher A was in her early forties. She spoke very slowly and repeated virtually everything that she said. At first I thought that she was doing this because she was talking to me and she assumed that as a foreigner I could not understand her. As I watched her interact with the others, however, I realized that this was just the way she was. It wasn’t a stutter exactly, because every word was clear and concise, but she repeated herself again and again regardless of whom she was speaking with.

Teacher A sat next to me and began telling me stories. She told me that Daoist Master Bob “is mysterious because most times when you burn incense the stick of the incense doesn’t burn because it is wood. Once, I was praying to Guangong with Daoist Master Bob and the incense burst into flames!” She
gave me a meaningful glance. "It just burst into flames!"

"Another time two people died and no one took care of them because there were no relatives - Daoist Master Bob took care of them - he buried them - and they came to him in a dream to thank him!" She gave me another penetrating look. "They came in a dream to thank him...to thank him."

"Also, when a person is decapitated or loses a limb they will be the same in the next life after they die. Daoist Master Bob can fix this with plastic necks and heads!" This time she stared at me even more intently, nodding her head up and down for emphasis, "Plastic necks and heads."

Earlier, Daoist Master Bob had told everyone not to cross an invisible line between the incense pot and the cardboard box in the middle of the temple because this was the path of the gods. Mrs. Li, her three sisters, one of their husbands, and four or five children were there to see the show, but it had been about a half an hour and the children were getting restless. On three occasions, Daoist Master Bob peeked in the box and burned paper money on the floor in front of it. The video of Daoist Master Bob giving rice to the poor was playing continuously. In the meantime he went across the street to a convenience store and came back with a pack of cigarettes and began to smoke.

We sat there for the duration of the tape. Daoist Master Bob had arrived at 8 p.m. and by 9:15 I still had not had a chance to talk to him again because I was on the wrong side of the no-cross line. While we waited, Mrs. Li told me that Daoist Master Bob raised several stray dogs on the second floor of the apartment temple. She said that he treated them as well as people and that after a dog gave birth he would give it special food for a month just like one would with a person (2). There was also an old dog and a puppy running in and out of our small audience. They seemed to have a preference for lying in the no-pass zone in spite of the hotdog that Daoist Master Bob left on the ground to lure them away.

By 9:30 Mrs. Li, her mother, her sisters, and their children all seemed to have completely lost interest. I was talking with Mrs. Li, but when I glanced back towards the box I saw that Daoist Master Bob had his head and arms in the box. I do not think anyone was watching him when he went to the box - people were busy playing with the children, talking with each other, or watching the videotape. Daoist Master Bob emerged from the box looking disappointed. He shook his head sadly and burned some more paper money in front of the box. About twenty minutes later he had Mrs. Li's brother-in-law reach in without looking and start pulling out chocolate coins, other hard candies, and a bottle of liquor.

Everyone was amazed. We all applauded and Daoist Master Bob radiated pride. He opened the liquor and poured a rather large glass for me and said "taste, no flavor!" To me it tasted rather strong - like scotch or some other hard alcohol mixed with water and sugar. Whatever it was it made my stomach twitch for the rest of the evening. When we finished it was 10 p.m. He then gave us three bottles of liquor (one for Mrs. Li, one for her sister, and one for me) which he said had been stored in a coffin for three years with mushrooms and 100 year old clothing. The liquor was supposed to be very potent medicine and only to be drunk a sip at a time. When I got home I checked the label on the bottle. It was dated that year (1996) and seemed like pretty standard rice wine to me. Daoist Master Bob opened my bottle and made me drink out of it three times. On the third sip, he took the bottom of the bottle and shoved it upwards so that I would have to take a bigger gulp.

After the box miracle we toured several different graveyards. Daoist Master Bob pointed off into an empty area and said "within five minutes you will see a [ghost] in that field!" We all stared for about ten minutes but no-one claimed to have seen anything. He then called us over to another area where he pointed to a tree, claiming that it was the shape of a ghost, and then pointed to another that was the shape of a dog. I'm afraid I was not very good at this because many of them were in the shapes of Chinese artistic representations of animals or gods that they were all familiar with but I was not - something akin to pointing to a bush that looked like Mount Rushmore when the person looking had never seen the monument. I took this as a form of cloud gazing at first but then Daoist Master Bob proudly stated that the trees were not that shape before.

After touring this graveyard Mrs. Li's sister went home and only Mrs. Li, her mother, Daoist Master Bob, Teacher A, and myself remained. We then went to a much poorer graveyard. Each grave was tightly packed between other graves. The cemetery was overrun with weeds and was littered with empty canisters of gasoline. The graveyard was exactly like one you might see in a Chinese movie about ghosts - abandoned, overrun, and dark. To our right there was a long pathway leading up to a small dark temple

20
with red candles burning in it. There was also a red light to the right of the temple and many tombstones. Daoist Master Bob rapped our heads with his knuckles, one by one. “Do you see them?” he asked, referring to the ghosts that should have appeared before our eyes at that moment.

My eyes were getting used to the dark and I did see several white shapes set evenly apart in a horizontal line. I replied that I could see white shapes but that I did not know whether or not they were ghosts. Mrs. Li said the same. Teacher A said she could see child ghosts dancing around. Then Daoist Master Bob said, “Look, there is a red light from the ghost!” Mrs. Li later told me that she thought this was silly because she had seen the light before but that Teacher A responded that the red light was in front of the real light and we were looking at the wrong place.

We walked down a path with graves on both sides. Daoist Master Bob walked ahead of us, occasionally doing a little hop and a skip, or muttering something I could not hear and sporadically making hand gestures inspired from a book he had shown me earlier on traditional Daoist spells. Teacher A whispered to me that he was apologizing to the ghosts for disturbing them and doing magical incantations to protect us. On the way back to the car we walked by a run-down grave. Half of the concrete lid of the grave had been broken off and a tarp had been laid over it. He asked me if I wanted to see the corpse. I did not, nor did the others. He seemed immensely satisfied that he had finally intimidated us. In retrospect I regret not looking, in part because that is the kind of thing good anthropologists do, and in part because the images I kept conjuring up afterwards were probably worse than what I would have actually seen. At the time, however, it seemed too grotesque to be peering at dead bodies, and a tad disrespectful.

When we got back to the car where Mrs. Li’s mother had been waiting, there was a group of approximately ten teenagers (two girls, the rest boys) who were sitting on their scooters and talking. They seemed harmless to me but everyone I was with seemed very disturbed that the youths would be loitering in graveyards late at night.

We went to a third set of nearby graveyards. On the way Daoist Master Bob stopped at a public phone and called the police to tell them about the loiterers. Daoist Master Bob said that it was light out in spite of there being no moon and stated that this was because of the protective light of the goddess Guanyin. To me it looked like any open field next to the lights of a large factory.

We were leaving when two policemen on motorcycles arrived and Daoist Master Bob told them about the teenagers. I asked Mrs. Li why he had called the police and she replied that the youths were probably on amphetamines. From the look of the teenagers she was probably right but I still didn’t see the point. Daoist Master Bob had just that day gotten a drug user out of prison, after all, and the youths weren’t bothering anyone. When driving home we stopped at another police station and Daoist Master Bob went in to tell the policeman there about the teenagers.

At the end of the night we went to Teacher A’s house which was on the premises of her husband’s tanning factory. We went in to show her husband that she really was out with us rather than gallivanting with others. After one look at Daoist Master Bob and myself, her husband instantly seemed to relax. Apparently, Teacher A was on the verge of a divorce and Daoist Master Bob was acting as a kind of marriage counselor for the two. As it turned out, I learned from Mrs. Li sometime later, he was also having an affair with Teacher A.

Daoist Master Bob had gone outside for a moment and when he came back in he asked for ice. I was walking outside when one of the five or six dogs in the yard came up to me waving its tail and sniffing my leg. “How sweet” I thought, bending down to pet the dog. When the others waved me away, I saw that blood was pouring out of the dog’s nose. “He’s sick” (you bing) they said, and Daoist Master Bob held ice wrapped up in a towel to the dog’s nose to reduce the bleeding. Apparently, I had misunderstood the nature of the dog’s problem. Daoist Master Bob told me that the dog had been hit on the nose with a brick by one of the workers. It was in a sense a relief that the dog was not sick, both for the dog and for myself since it had gotten blood on my pants, but it was also very disturbing because blood was pouring out of the dog’s nose like syrup. In my less charitable moments I suspect that Daoist Master Bob hurt the dog himself so that he could make a show of helping it, but I could be wrong.

It was past two in the morning when our evening came to a close. As Daoist Master Bob got out of the car he suddenly turned to me and said, “Don’t exaggerate when you write these things down…don’t make
us look bad.” I assured him that he had been exceptionally kind and gracious to me and that I was grateful. Later, when reviewing my field notes, I saw that Daoist Master Bob filled the role of comforter of worried parents, magician, mediator for drug addicts, police informant, donator to the poor, savior (and possible tormentor) of dogs, marriage counselor, and lover of lonely wives. “Who needs to exaggerate?” I thought.

II. Disillusionment

The next morning Mrs. Li told me that she couldn’t sleep at all the night before because she was trying to decide whether or not to believe Daoist Master Bob. She told me that she would probably go back to the graves the following week by herself in the day time to see if he had really called spirits to change the shapes of the trees or if she could see the shapes without him.

Mrs. Li told me several accounts that led her to believe that Daoist Master Bob was legitimate. He had predicted that another couple would get pregnant and the exact day that the woman would give birth. Mrs. Li said she was not sure whether or not to believe that but she definitely believed the gods had placed the liquor and chocolate in the cardboard box. Her mother said that even that could have been false but the important thing was that Daoist Master Bob was a good man who helped many people, and even animals.

Mrs. Li said that the fact that he had three thousand followers in such a small temple must have meant that he had great power. According to Mrs. Li, he had only lived in Gaoshing for eight years. He used to live in Hualien, a smaller city on the East Coast, but moved because the gods told him that there were many ghosts that needed taking care of in Gaoshing. After this they discussed how rich Daoist Master Bob was. Mrs. Li said that he had told her about his land in Tainan and she noted how expensive land was there and that he had a great deal of it. As we crossed a large bridge they told me that there used to be many fatal car accidents there. Daoist Master Bob told them that he had begun protecting it and that if they did not believe him they could check the accident records to see how drastically reduced the accidents were on the bridge.

In the following two years I had several opportunities to talk with Mrs. Li about Daoist Master Bob. A few months after our graveyard outing, she told me that Teacher A’s husband eventually divorced her. Daoist Master Bob, who had received NT$10 million (US$293,800) of the couple’s money through teacher A’s patronage, sided with her husband, no doubt believing that once divorced, Teacher A would not have any significant income to contribute to Daoist Master Bob’s coffers. In addition to the fact that Daoist Master Bob had slept with and then abandoned her friend, Mrs. Li gradually lost faith in the man because of other actions.

In November of 1997 I interviewed Mrs. Li again. She told me that she did not believe Daoist Master Bob anymore because he said many things that were not true. He had predicted that her sister’s child would be a boy when it was a girl, for example. With great emphasis she told me that he tricked people out of a lot of money. Though she never told me how much she had and her husband had given to Daoist Master Bob, I suspect that it was a very large sum. Mrs. Li said, “The scariest thing about him is that he really believes what he says himself even though he is wrong all the time.” A few weeks earlier Mrs. Li’s mother told her that she never believed him.

In June of 1998 Mrs. Li told me that Daoist Master Bob had skipped town. She learned this when his landlord went to Mrs. Li’s family to find out if they knew where he was. Apparently he had not paid rent on his temple for years. Even before this, however, Mrs. Li had lost her faith in the man. I will conclude this section with her statements about this, taken from an interview in February 1998:

When I first met Daoist Master Bob, Teacher A had brought him to my house. He immediately asked me if I was Christian. I was very surprised that he could tell just by looking at me that I am Christian. He said that many of his followers used to be Christian but they switched to join his temple. Later he invited my husband and me to dinner. There were a lot of doctors there. I was sitting next to one doctor. At first I couldn’t believe he was a doctor – he looked and talked really low class like Daoist Master Bob, but it turned out he was not only a doctor but the head of the hospital – I know because I went to the hospital once.

Anyway, this doctor told me that his wife had an abortion and the next day Daoist Master Bob told
him that his wife would get pregnant again that month. The doctor said it was impossible for a woman to get pregnant the same month she had an abortion but his wife really did get pregnant. He said this convinced him of Daoist Master Bob’s power.

At that time I was doubting my Christian beliefs. Daoist Master Bob often dropped by the school to say hello. He would bring small gifts and treat us to dinner. He really became like family. I don’t believe him anymore, I think he loves money too much. He was very poor as a child, that’s probably why he loves money so much. When he first came to Gaoliong he couldn’t even afford to pay the veterinarian. Now, eight years later, he is hanging out with doctors and politicians.

Last year, a friend of mine asked him to help her decide if she should buy a certain house or not. He went, took one look at the house and decided that he wanted to buy it on the spot. Because houses are so expensive people usually think about it for weeks. He decided in five minutes. And whereas other people need to pay for the house in small installments over many years, he bargained with the owner by offering to pay the whole amount in one lump sum — that’s how rich he’s become!

I gave up Christianity for six months to join Daoist Master Bob’s temple but then I returned to Christianity. I still have doubts about Christianity but in the end there is no way to prove or disprove anything. Daoist Master Bob was always wrong, and that magic trick with the cardboard box — that can’t be true.

III. Performance and Individual Agency

At first glance, the preceding story might seem like a random series of events. On closer examination, however, this account, and the later statements reinterpreting the religious master’s efficacy, provide abundant information on the nature of using religious ritual to promote one’s self as a religious master, and of the limitations that he or she might face. Of equal importance, one sees the process of belief for the clients.

Symbolic Capital — From the Secular to the Sacred

Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic capital (1972) is clearly at work here, for Daoist Master Bob’s legitimacy relied as much on his secular activities as on the particular rituals that he conducted. That he helped to get the amphetamine user out of prison is but one example of the secular services that he offered. Relying on his connections (guanxi) he demonstrated his power on the local political level, and his compassion for those associated with him. His relations with prominent figures such as doctors and politicians further emphasized his legitimacy. Both Teacher A and Mrs. Li cited these as examples of his power as much as anything he had done in the religious sphere.

One might guess that these social connections would also provide him with information that he could use to validate his spiritual efficacy. In my interviews with Mrs. Li, for example, the possibility did not seem to occur to her that Daoist Master Bob knew that she was a Christian because Teacher A had told him so. Similarly, his contacts at the hospital could have provided him with information about his clients ranging from illness, to abortions, to deaths in the family. All of this information could then have been presented as divine inspiration. Similarly, his contacts in the political realm could have given him access to information that led him to predict the local election — although in this case, the information turned out to be erroneous (3). Also, one might anticipate that the same connections that allowed him to get the drug user out of prison could be used to keep himself out of harm’s way — Taiwan’s government has been known to imprison religious masters for fraud and/or extortion after all.

As with many other religious experts in Taiwan, Daoist Master Bob acted as a spiritual healer when he cured the two babies. The fact that this was presented as giving the babies courage that would calm them would seem to be a way of comforting new parents who were worried about their infants’ crying. Thus, in playing the role of healer, Daoist Master Bob was in a sense also acting as psychological therapist for the overly anxious parents.

His presentation of self as a savior to animals as well as people apparently added to his legitimacy — remember Mrs. Li’s mother’s statement the day after the graveyard outing, for example, in which she used this as proof of his being a good person when she and Mrs. Li were discussing whether or not to believe in him as a religious master. This is the best explanation I can think of to explain his eagerness to call the police on the youths in the graveyard (4). By informing the police (not once but twice) of the potentially
disruptive youth, he was in a sense calling our attention to his moral status as a protector of the people. It is no coincidence, I think, that Mrs. Li believed the cardboard box magic trick when she had faith in his morality in these other spheres and that she changed her mind about it when she had decided that he was not a good person.

Political Performance and the Will to Believe

Political maneuvering in witchcraft accusation and confession has vividly been portrayed in fiction (Miller 1953) and in anthropological accounts (Bailey 1994: 154, 204; Levi-Strauss 1963: 172-174; Turner 1967: 387). Such accusations and confessions become a form of sociopolitical theater in which political and economic grievances can be voiced and social norms can be reinforced (5).

Similarly, day to day religious practice can be seen to be a performance (Turner 1967, 1974) (6). Religious ritual involves the manipulation of symbols such as objects, relationships, and gestures, among others (Turner 1967: 19). Successful ritual, then, relies on spoken and/or unconscious agreement on the significance of such symbols, or at least a willingness to ignore conflicts or questions related to the symbolic meanings of ritual (Turner 1967: 385-393).

For the audience this might be seen as a form of alienation in which participants are unaware of the sociopolitical formations that their actions create, a point that Steven Sangren has eloquently argued for Taiwanese pilgrimages (Sangren 2000: 69, 200). Yet co-existing with this is an often unacknowledged understanding of the larger social roles that such practice creates. Functional ignorance, in which one feigns lack of knowledge to keep societal wheels turning, should not be overlooked here.

By the very nature of religious performance, a religious practitioner must have a coldly realistic understanding of the above mentioned aspects of ritual, whether consciously articulated or not (Levi-Strauss 1963: 168; Mauss 1950: 11). Paradoxically, it has been suggested, this does not exclude the idea of actual belief, for even someone who consciously manipulates a performance may be a true believer of the larger cause and effect of religious performances (Mauss 1950: 117-120).

Mauss speaks of a “will to believe” in religious ritual or magical performance (Mauss 1950: 117-120). David Jordan uses a case study in Taiwan to demonstrate a similar point when he provides a telling account of a wielder of divination sticks who, intoxicated by the central role he has been given in his congregation, keeps his audience for an unreasonable amount of time (Jordan 1972: 63; 1982: 117). When the audience had been tested beyond their endurance, one man stood up saying that the man leading the divination session was asking the questions in such a way that the gods could not respond properly (Jordan 1972: 63; 1982: 117). Jordan convincingly argues that this demonstrates that Taiwanese worshippers paradoxically believe and have a working understanding of the human agency in what should be a purely divine event (Jordan 1972: 63; 1982: 117).

Yet, as Margery Wolf has shown, agreement with a wider body of religious doctrine does not necessarily lead to belief of an individual practitioner’s claims (Wolf 1990). Daoist Master Bob’s clients seemed to believe because they wanted to. For Teacher A, believing in Daoist Master Bob gave her faith that her marital problems would be solved. Similarly, if Mrs. Li could maintain her faith in Daoist Master Bob’s power to have the gods put candy and alcohol in a box, she could also trust him when he told her that he could convince the gods to help her have a child. Disbelief, then, led to loss of hope about other uncertainties in their lives.

Mrs. Li’s wavering between Christianity and the religious services that Daoist Master Bob offered, presents an ideal case study to examine this set of issues. Mrs. Li, we should remember, had begun to doubt Christianity because of a lack of tangible proof that Daoist Master Bob could seemingly provide. To an outside observer, the cardboard box magic trick might have seemed like little more than waiting until the audience was bored and distracted to slip candy and liquor into the box that he had bought across the street. To the Taiwanese audience, however, suspension of disbelief was easier because they had faith that Daoist Master Bob was a moral being, and because he drew on long standing ideas about the gods and religious efficacy to produce tangible results. Thus, his use of Daoist magic in the graveyard, as legitimated by a book of traditional rituals, or the rituals involving talismanic spells to cure the infants, tied his religious performance in with a long history of religious belief and practice. To his audience,
then, the cardboard box magic trick took on the significance, and legitimating powers, of turning water into wine.

The Self, Quiet Individualism, and Moral Fantasy

There is a growing body of scholarship that addresses increasing individualism in Asia stemming from transnational capitalism (Holden and Tsuruki 2003; Iwabuchi 2002; McVeigh 2003; Ong 1987) and/or from a new technological order (Holden and Tsuruki 2003; Iwabuchi 2002; McVeigh 2003; Yano 2000). Scholarship, primarily on Japan, addressing issues of contextualized selves (Kondo 1990, 1992; Rosenberger 1992, 2001) seems to contrast this by problematizing the notion of one immutable self.

Both fields of scholarship are insightful yet problematic: In addressing modern cultural shifts one loses sight of the individualistic aspects of traditional Asian cultures. In contextualizing Asian selves one runs the risk of reifying perceived differences between East and West (Rosenberger 1992: 2, Spiro 1993: 116) and potentially undermining their humanity by suggesting that they are somehow fundamentally different from all other people (Berque 1992: 102). The idea that Westerners are individuals free of social dependency is also highly exaggerated (Lamb 2000: 40; Spiro 1993: 136,142). This is not to say that differences do not exist, but that one should be wary of exaggerating the differences of either the East or the West (Spiro 1993: 116).

Importantly, the work attempting to undermine notions of individual selves often speaks towards the presence of the individual. Nancy Rosenberger, for example, states that dividing people’s psyches too closely between the individual and the group would seem to be one of degree rather than absolutes (Rosenberger 2001:4). Individuals and their social setting are interactive, not opposing forces (Rosenberg 1992: 1). Group orientation or contextual presentation with differentiations of the self should not exclude “individual intentionality” (Bachnik 1992: 167).

Melford Spiro, taking issue with Geertz and others, also warns against the dichotomy of the Western individual self vs. the selfless-other dichotomy. He points out that people around the world exhibit evidence of a conceptualized self as can be seen in linguistics (all languages have the terms “I,” “you”, and “he/she”), psychology, or anthropology (Spiro 1993: 108-110). He goes on to assert, correctly I think, that to be unable to distinguish between self and other could only arise from severe mental illness that would result in a failure to cope with social expectations (Spiro 1993: 112). It should also be noted that Americans also have contextualized selves (Goffman 1959) which does not preclude the existence of a conception of a self or of the motivation to maximize an individual’s position with wealth, power, and/or status.

I argue that both traditional China and Taiwan have long had strong strains of individualism. In making this argument, however, a distinction needs to be made between Western individualism and what I call “quiet individualism.” When scholars note, for example, the growing individualism in modern Asia they are clearly referring to Western individualism in which one has a rhetorical and ideological commitment to the rights of the individual over the group. This form of individualism is certainly being ushered in by Hollywood, pop music, missionaries, and language instruction, among others.

However, if an overt commitment to the individual is a relatively new aspect of Asian culture, individual actors have long attempted to maximize their personal status, economics, and/or power (Spiro 1993: 134). In traditional China, for example, imperial examinations, government office, and economic success benefited the group (extended families, lineages, and villages) but they also brought considerable honor/fame to the individual. For contemporary Taiwan, anthropological scholarship on gender (Simon 2003; Wolf 1968, 1972) and religion (Jordan 1972; Jordan and Overmyer 1986: 169-171; Weller 1996: 262) are especially good demonstrations of a determined self promotion underneath the thin veneer of group orientation. This attempt to benefit the self is often couched in terms of helping the family, the community, or the nation – I therefore call it “quiet individualism.”

One of the most important ways that people legitimate quiet individualism is to emphasize its morality, whether through the religious sphere or by stressing the benefits to the group. By aligning individualistic fantasy with group benefit it is transformed into what might be called a “moral fantasy.”

In short, although an ideology of individualism seems to be fairly new, and contested, in modern
Taiwan and China, these societies were never a harmonious group-oriented whole as their, or our, rhetoric might have suggested. And without discounting Durkheimian social solidarity, religion is an excellent site to examine individual fantasies.

Malinowski emphasizes the individualistic psychological catharsis of harming others through sorcery (Malinowski 1925: 71), a point that I have explored elsewhere (Moskowitz 2001). With Daoist Master Bob we see magic being used for good rather than for evil, yet there also seems to be a similar psychological benefit derived from the process.

Returning to the literature on witch hunts that I presented above (Bailey 1994; Levi-Strauss 1963; Miller 1953) one sees far more than a mere supplication to authority at work, but rather, a surprisingly enthusiastic and creative participation by the concerned individuals.

This account of Daoist Master Bob demonstrates strongly individualistic actors – Daoist Master Bob as leader of the religious drama; Mrs. Li, Teacher A, and other players (including myself) as both audience and participants. Clearly all of the participants had differing interpretations of the events as well as motivations for being there.

By emphasizing the moral nature of this fantasy the participants not only downplayed the economic aspects of their transactions but in a sense took the edge off individualistic fantasies in which one prayed for specific personal benefits. In this way, individualistic elements of their actions were made palatable.

**Conclusion**

Mrs. Li returned to Christianity, though not without doubts, precisely because of its intangibility. This is perhaps a bit less exciting than transforming trees and dancing baby ghosts at midnight graveyard outings. Yet it still allows for an ordering of chaos and the assertion of one’s own agency in a moral drama in which the gods watch and judge, offering tangible benefits for the good, and equally concrete punishment for those who have transgressed.

In the end, Daoist Master Bob failed for the exact reasons that he had succeeded. Tangible results seem to provide concrete proof for an uncertain religious world. The problem with tangibility, of course, is that it presents a likelihood of equally solid evidence that one is wrong.

What is striking, then, is not that Daoist Master Bob was able to play these odds, but that he was able to do so for so long. He spent nine years at the Gaoxiong temple and became a millionaire in the process. As an economic strategy, therefore, it was not important that he would eventually be found out as long as he could evade being arrested which seems to have been as simple as skipping town.

In looking at the above accounts of Daoist Master Bob’s practice, we can see the highly individualized process of religious fantasy. A significant difference from Western individualism is that quiet individualism is legitimated as moral fantasy in which individuals’ created dramas are portrayed as being for the good of others. Because Daoist Master Bob drew on traditional understandings about gods and ghosts, and because most Taiwanese and Chinese whom I have told this story to smilingly recognize Daoist Master Bob as a “type” that they too have encountered, it seems justifiable to say that this can give us a sense for how these things are often done, and no doubt for how they have been done for quite some time.

The emergence of Western individualism does indeed mark a shift between traditional and modern Taiwanese society. But then, and now, quiet individualism persists under the guise of group orientation. Today, this continues to be a more pervasive theme in most Taiwanese people’s lives, even in the midst of growing Western individualism. Looking at the above examples, then, one sees that in many cases the distinction between new and old forms of individualism may have more to do with a change in rhetoric and ideology than in individuals’ true motivations or actions. This analytical approach, while acknowledging the social or public uses of religious rituals, points to a highly individualized and imaginative participation that belies the myth of conforming or selfless Asians.
Endnotes

1. This article is based on fieldwork conducted from April of 1996 to July of 1999 for my book, The Haunting Fetus: Abortion, Sexuality, and the Spirit World in Taiwan (2001). This fieldwork would not have been possible without the generous support of a Fulbright-Hays grant from the U.S. Department of Education Center for International Education, and grants from the Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange and the Pacific Cultural Foundation. Also, I presented an earlier version of this article at the 2003 association of Asian Studies conference. I am therefore grateful for the feedback of the audience members.

2. Traditionally, women in China and Taiwan who have just given birth go through a month's resting period (suo yuezi) when they eat special foods and do not engage in physically strenuous tasks. Another possible reason that Daoist Master Bob had so many dogs might be because Taiwanese people tend to be extremely afraid of medium or large size dogs so this may have also been a way of protecting his house from burglars. Another temple that I spent a good deal of time at, for example, kept several very large dogs at the temple, presumably because locals knew the large amount of money passing hands at the temple.

3. Another possibility is that he was backing the politician with hope of later repayment.

4. There is also the possibility is that he was marking his territory and did not want them to interfere with his activities on his midnight tours of the graveyard.

5. Forced sorcery confessions have also been documented in China, most notably in Philip Kuhn's work (1990). There are also clearly theatrical elements in other forms of religious practice in China and Taiwan. Joseph Esherick (1987) and Paul Cohen (1997) have outlined a rather dramatic (if you will pardon the pun) connection between the Boxer uprising and performance. They point out that the Boxers learned at least some of their fighting techniques from village opera performances and that the stylized swordsmanship of the possessed Boxers was virtually identical to theatrical performances of the time (Cohen 1997: 106-107; Esherick 1987: 218).

6. Turner's otherwise brilliant scholarship suffers from the fact that his analysis on individuals in such performances assumes a common, shared, understanding and interpretation of the religious events. Somewhat unsettlingly, he speaks of "the individual" (1974: 232) in such a way that the term with a few exceptions, inevitably boils down to a generic man - and I use the gendered nuance purposefully here - in which one representative individual is more or less the same as another. The individual thus loses his individual nature and therefore the idea that there may be highly individualized interpretations is lost, as is the case when he speaks of a "false dichotomy between the individual subject, and society as object" (Turner 1974: 269). Thus, in Turner's analysis of the individual (Turner 1974: 285), even those marginalized and outside institutionalized groups take on a kind of conforming union in their isolation.

References

Bachnik, Jane

Bailey, F.G.

Berque, Augustin

Bourdieu, Pierre

Cohen, Paul A.

Esherick, Joseph

Goffman, Erving

Holden, Todd Joseph Miles, and Takako Tsuruki

Jordan, David K.


Jordan, David K. and Daniel J. Overmyer

Kondo, Dorinne K.

Biographical Sketch

Marc L. Moskowitz is an Assistant Professor of Sociology and Anthropology at Lake Forest College. He is author of The Haunting Fetus: Abortion, Sexuality, and the Spirit World in Taiwan (2001) and co-editor of The Minor Arts of Daily Life: Popular Culture in Taiwan (2004). He lived in mainland China for one year in 1998-1999 and in Taiwan for a total of approximately 7 years from 1989 to today.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guānyīn</td>
<td>觀音</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>guānxì</td>
<td>關係</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lìfàyuàn</td>
<td>立法院</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yǒu bìng</td>
<td>有病</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zuò yuèzi</td>
<td>做月子</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>