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Daoism in Hong Kong A Case Study

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1. Introduction

Daoism in Hong Kong may be roughly divided into three groups. Firstly, there are the professional Daoists who belong to the school of Zheng Yi. These Daoists are called *naam moh lo* in Hong Kong (or *nan wu lao* in Mandarin). They perform rituals for money in big festivals such as *jiao*, or funerals. They may belong to a group or *tang* or they may work as individuals. Their group or *tang* is called *naam moh gun (nan wu guan)* in Hong Kong. They learn this profession from members of their family or from a master (*shi fu*). They are a non-monastic, non-celibate group of specialists who eat ordinary food outside of ritual performances and live like any other ordinary citizen.¹

Secondly, there are the regional or communal Daoist temples which may be owned and controlled by organizations of allied villages. John A. Brim calls them village alliance temples.² There may also be temples orginally belonging to a community but which are now controlled by the government. Temples such as the Wen Wu Temple in Hollywood Road or the Tian Hou Temple in Causeway Bay are examples of the latter.

Thirdly, there are private temples that are owned by groups. Most of these temples are members of the Hong Kong Daoist Association. They are charitable organizations. They promote their religion and they accept followers. Most of these temples practise fu ji, a special way of communicating with spirits or gods by using a sand tray and a wooden pen. To be a follower one has to go through certain rituals.

This article studies the third group of Daoists, giving an account of how and when they moved to Hong Kong from China, what they have done in Hong Kong and what changes they have experienced.

John Richard Gresham Mathias, "A Study of the Jiao, a Taoist Ritual, in Kam Tin, in the Hong Kong New Territories." PhD thesis, Oxford University, p. 75.

² John A. Brim, "Village Alliance Temples in Hong Kong", in: Arthur, P. Wolf, Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society, Stanford 1974, pp. 94-103.

2. Master Zeng's temple

Master Zeng was born in Jiu Jiang, Namhai, Guangdong Province. As a child, he had polio and was paralyzed and could not walk at all. One day he was possessed by Lu Dong-bin, one of the Eight Immortals (*ba xian*). Lu Dongbin spoke to Zeng's parents through the child, telling them that the child's fate was interwined with the god Lu Dong-bin. He could cure the child, but the child must dedicate his life and work for Lu Dong-bin to propagate the doctrines of Dao. When the parents agreed, the child was cured and could walk again. After this incident, people knew Zeng had the ability to communicate with the spirits. They asked him to be the medium in a Daoist shrine called *Qun Ying Tang*. Zeng went to school while working as a medium. When he grew older, he worked as a *ji shou*, one who controls the wooden pen in *fu ji*. To be a *ji shou* one has to know how to read and write. Zeng also learnt how to draw charms (*fu*) and tried to heal diseases with charms.

One day Lu Dong-bin instructed him through the means of *fu ji*, to go to Ying Yuan Gong Temple in Guangzhou (Canton). Zeng was told to look for the abbot Ye Jing-shan and study under him. Ying Yuan Gong Temple was affiliated to Chong Xu Guan in Luo Fu Shan, one of the major Daoist mountains in Guangdong Province. Chong Xu Guan belonged to the Daoist sect of Quan Zhen. So Zeng became a disciple in Ying Yuan Gong Temple in Guanzhou and was the 25th generation of the lodge of character *cheng*. After studying in Ying Yuan Gong Temple, Zeng went back to his home town and organized Daoist schools. During World War II he came to Hong Kong. He formed a Daoist group called Qun Xiu Tan in Kowloon. When Hong Kong was occupied by the Japanese, he went back to Jiu Jiang.

In 1950/51 Zeng came to Hong Kong again. He rented a room in Shek Kip Mei. After only a short time he was kicked out by the land-lady who was a Roman Catholic and could not stand Zeng having a Daoist altar in her house. Through the help of a friend, Zeng was introduced to a man named Luo who was living in the same area. Luo was a graduate from Zhong Shan University and was living with his wife and children in a small flat. He told Zeng that if he did not mind, he could sleep in his apartment in the corridor on a camp bed. He allowed Zeng to put the altar for Lu Dong-bin on the table above the earth god (tu di). And so Zeng lived in Luo's place and they became good friends. It was after World War II and after the Revolution in China. Luo was at a critical turning-point in his life. He thought that Daoism promoted the goodness of human beings and he became interested in joining Zeng to form a Daoist group. One day, through the wooden pen and the sand tray, Lu Dong-bin told the two that Zeng was the root of Dao and Luo was

the seal of Dao. Luo was given a Daoist name, Yun Liang Zi. Luo and Zeng rented a small flat in Kowloon and set up an altar which was registered as a private temple.

In about 1954/55, Luo had a stroke of good luck. His wife had a dream one night. She dreamed she had won the lottery. When she woke up she still remembered the number of the lottery ticket, namely 1234567. She asked Luo to buy one with that number. Luo told her that it must be a joke, as no one could find such a ticket in a city like Hong Kong. His wife told him that perhaps he could just buy a lottery ticket with a number starting with one and ending with seven. But one day Luo did find such a lottery ticket when he was having coffee in Shanghai Street. He bought it and won ten thousand and eight dollars. With his winnings he decided to buy an apartment for the temple. He and Zeng asked their god Lu Dong-bin where it should be located. From the sand tray and wooden pen they were instructed to buy an apartment at 929 Canton Road, Kowloon. When they went to that address, the former building had been torn down and a new building was under construction. They bought an apartment in the new building and registered it as a temple, Wan De Zhi Shan She. It was a charitable organization and limited company. In 1955, they bought another apartment and after some years they had four apartments in the same building.

Master Zeng went to San Francisco in 1965. He set up a Daoist and Buddhist society in San Francisco with some of his followers. The society was called Guangming Fo Dao She. In 1967 Zeng returned to Hong Kong. He went to San Francisco again in 1977 and set up another society, Zhi Shan Fo Dao She. He died in San Francisco in 1982. He had contributed his whole life to his god Lu Dong-bin. He was never married and had no children.

In the 1970's, Zeng's temple in Hong Kong was extended. They bought another six apartments on a nearby street. In 1979 they bought another apartment in Tai Po, New Territories, and started a branch (*fen tan*) temple. In 1976/77 they bought a large piece of land in the countryside near Tai Po. They built a house there. The plan was to open a temple with a vegetarian restaurant and a big garden to attract tourists from the urban area. Unfortunately, their land was situated in an area designated for catching water for a reservoir and the restaurant was not allowed due to water pollution control. The place was used as a resort for members of the temple.

3. Daoist Temples in Hong Kong

There are more than three hundred registered Chinese temples in Hong Kong. Some of these temples are private temples administered by a religious group or by a regional community. Some are managed by the government by employed temple watchers. There are more than sixty temples registered as members of the Hong Kong Daoist Association. Nearly all of these temples are registered as private temples.

The most popular temples in Hong Kong are Tian Hou Temples. Tian Hou is the goddess of fishermen. There are more than fifty Tian Hou Temples in Hong Kong. The other popular temples are Hong Sheng Temples, Guan Yin Temples, and Bei Di Temples. Most of these temples are managed by the Rural Community Committee and temple watchers. These temples are used mainly for celebrating the birthdays of the gods, on which occasion the villages are present. At other times the temple is open for everybody to give offerings to the gods. At the beginning of the lunar year, people come to make their wishes and at the end of it they come to thank the gods for their protection during the year. Some villagers still keep the tradition of giving offers to the gods on the first and the fifteenth day of the lunar month.

Many of these community temples are very old. For example, the Tian Hou Temple in Stanley is said to be over 180 years old. The Wen Wu Temple in Hollywood Road is reputed to be over 100 years old and the Che Gong Temple in Shatin over 120 years old.³ Unlike the community temples, private Daoist temples, often called *dao tang*, were set up much later. The earliest *dao tangs* were moved to Hong Kong from China during the 1920's and 1930's. For example, the very well known temple of Huang Da Xian (known as Wong Tai Sin in Hong Kong) was moved to Hong Kong from Guangzhou in 1921. The Xing Gong Cao Tang in Tai Po and the Feng Ying Xian Guan in Fanling were built before World War II. A non-Cantonese Daoist group, the Xian Tian Dao (also known as Yi Guan Dao in Taiwan) was established in Hong Kong in the 1920's The Long Qing Tang was established in Hong Kong in 1916, and the Fu Qing Tang in 1924.

The Xian Tian Dao integrate Daoism, Buddhism and Confucianism. It is also known in Hong Kong as Ya Dan Jio (duck egg religion).

Most of the private Daoist *dao tangs* have their origins in Guangdong Province. The majority of them were set up in Hong Kong after 1949 when many refugees came from China. Some were moved to Hong Kong earlier. For example, Huang Da Xian Ci was related to the Huang Da Xian Ci in Huang

134

³ V.R. Burkhardt, *Chinese Creeds and Customs*, SCM Post H.K. 8th Impression 1972, Vol. II, Appendix 3.

Sha, Guangzhou. The organization running this temple, the She She Yuan, was set up in 1921, when a temple was built in Wong Tai Sin in Kowloon. The present temple was re-built in 1973. Qing Song Xian Guan was related to Zhi Bao Tao in En Ling Road, Guangzhou. It was set up in Hong Kong in 1949. Yun Quan Xian Guan was affiliated to a temple in Xi Qiao Shan, Guangdong Province. It was set up in Hong Kong in 1944.

Most of the major *dao tangs* belong to the Daoist school of Quan Zhen. Lu Dong-bin is the most popular god. Other *dao tangs* also worship Qiu Zhang Chun, Lao Zi (also known as Tai Shang Lao Jun), and even Guan Yin. Besides the Quan Zhen Daoist, there are also other groups which may be identified as new religions⁴. The major ones are:

1. The Red Swastika Society (Hong Wan Zi Hui): This was introduced to Hong Kong by Jiang Fa Xian who was a civil servant in the Health Department. V.R. Burkhardt gives a detailed description in his *Chinese Creeds and Customs*.

> "The Red Swastika Society performs many of the functions of the Red Cross in China. It was founded in 1917 in the province of Shantung by an Army Colonel Liu Shao-chi and the District Magistrate Wu Fu-sun. Gathering together a few interested friends they formulated a new religion embodying the best elements of Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity. The doctrine of life beyond the grave strongly appealed to them, and they sought communication with departed spirits by means of the sand and tray and wooden pen."⁵

2. Tian De Sheng Jiao: This religion or sect was started by Xiao Changming, a monk who later resumed secular life. He started preaching in Huang Shan in about 1937.⁶ He also integrated the best elements of Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity.

In Hong Kong there are about eight *dao tangs*. They practice *fu ji* and *kan guang* (literally, looking at the light). This is a kind of communication with spirits or gods by looking at a piece of white cloth on the wall, similar to watching a slide show.

⁴ Lin Wan-chuan identifies religions that belong to the Xian Tian Dao system as new religions. Burkhardt also identifies the Red Swastika Society as a new religion.

⁵ Burkhardt, 1972, Vol. III, p. 145.

⁶ Tian De Sheng Jiao, zong jiao zhe xue yan jiu she gai yao, (An Introduction to the Society of Religion and Philosophy Studies), Liu De Fo Tang, 1968.

- 3. Tian Qi Dao: This sect was started by Lu Jia-bing in 1935 in Guangzhou.⁷ Lu was a graduate from Lingnam University (Guangzhou) and was working as a school headmaster. One day in 1935 he was suddenly inspired and was endowed with the power of healing by *qi gong*. He became very popular and lots of people came to him for healing. He came to Hong Kong during the war and lived in the New Territories. He practised healing also when he first came to Hong Kong but it was said that he was not as good as when he was in Guangzhou. The Tian Qi Dao sect worship the god called Zhi Da Zhi Zun (the highest and the most respectable). They also practise *fu ji*.
- 4. Xian Tian Dao: This sect was active in China during the Qing dynasty. Lin Wan-chuan, who studied this religion, said that it was started by Huang De Hui at the beginning of the Qing dynasty.⁸ It was introduced to Hong Kong as early as 1916 by the founding of Long Qing Tang. Even two years earlier in 1913, Zhi Lan Tang, a Xian Tian Dao women's group, was founded in Kowloon. Most of the Xian Tian Dao temples were set up in 1920's and 1930's, and many of these small groups were for women, probably for Amahs.⁹ Xian Tian Dao integrates Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism. In many of the women's lodges which are often known as Zhai Tang (vegetarian hall), they only worship Guan Yin. Xian Tian Dao also practise *fu ji*.

4. "Fu Ji"

Fu ji is a way of communicating with departed spirits. Burkhardt describes it as planchette. He writes,

"The medium is by no means the only way of communicating with departed spirits, as divination has been practised for centuries by means of the Fu Chi, or planchette, which is placed before the shrine of a god, and provides the answers to questions put to the oracle. The apparatus consists of a sand board and wooden pen. The board is a tray, twenty-six inches square and two and a quarter high. A wooden pen, nine inches long, straight at the top and slightly curved at the end, is fastened to a rod three feet long. It is manipulated by two persons, one holding the rod in his left, and the other

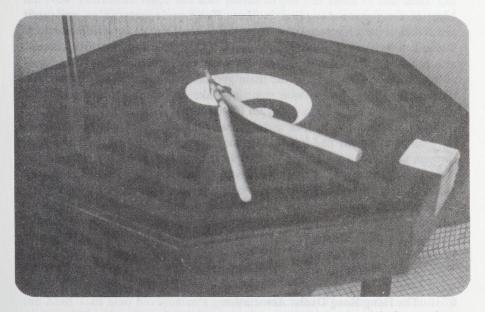
⁷ Hong Kong Daoist Association, xian gang dao jiao lian he hui xin xia luo cheng te kan, (Special Issue on the Inauguration of the New Building for the Hong Kong Daoist Association), 1975, p. 60.

⁸ Lin Wan-chuan, *xian tian da dao xi ton yan jiu* (The Study of the System of Xian Tian Da Dao), Taiwan, 1984.

⁹ Amahs are house maids who usually do not marry.

in his right hand. When the spirit responds, pressure is felt on the rod, which impels the pen to trace Chinese characters in the sand. A third person calls out the character, and a fourth transcribes. This method has the disadvantage of getting into communication with any disengaged spirit, and is far less personal than the clairvoyant, who professes ability to put the call through like a telephone exchange.¹⁰"

The wooden pen can be of different shapes, and it can be controlled by one person instead of two. The Chaozhou people use a bamboo basket called *shaoji*. In the middle of the *shaoji*, they put the wooden pen which is usually made of peach wood. In Singapore, lots of Dao Tangs use a fork of the peach tree to which they fasten a brush at the pointed end, for writing. They do not use a sand tray, instead, paper and red ink is used for writing.



A fu ji instrument: A fork of the peach tree to which a brush is fastened.

A dao tang that practises fu ji can be called ji tan (the ji altar). It was said that Guan Di or Guan Gong controls the Ji Tans all over the world and Guan Yin and Lu Dong-bin assist him. Very detailed instructions can be obtained

Law Yu Fai

from *fu ji*. Looking for a site dao tang is an example. As far as I know, besides Master Zeng's *dao tang*, the Yuan Xuan Xue Yuan in Tsuen Wan also got the present site through *fu ji*. The management of the *dao tang*, the accounts, and the resolving of personnel problems are very often instructed by *fu ji*. Besides the detailed daily problems, certain *ji tan* publish books. *Lu Zu Quan Ji* (the collected works of Lu Dong-bin) was partly written by Lu Dong-bin himself through *fu ji*. *Yi Dao Huan Yuan* (a medical book) was also written by *fu ji*. Some *ji tan* even write novels from *fu ji*. The Sheng Te Magazine Association in Taichung, Taiwan, for example has published a number of novels which are written through *fu ji*.¹¹

5. "ru dao" (to enter Dao)

Most of the private *dao tangs* in Hong Kong are registered as non-profit charitable organizations and are managed in the form of limited companies. There is always a board of directors. Besides the board of directors, there is also a core group of members who are supposed to be people who have entered Dao - or disciplines of the main god of the *dao tang*. This in-group is distinguished from people who come to make an offering to the gods. The ordinary people are called as *shan xin* (believers).

Each dao tang has its own membership rituals. In most of them the gods have to be informed and instructions and approvals received from the gods through fu ji. When a member or disciple is approved, there is a ritual of zan guan li (putting on a hat), and sometimes a Dao name (dao hao) is given to a disciple. There are few dao shi or Daoist monks. Most of them are laymen who have families and professions. In the 1950's and 1960's most of those who had entered Dao were business people. Later there were people from other professions. Most of the Xian Tian Dao followers have to be vegetarians. Most other Daoists are not allowed to eat beef and dog meat.

6. The Hong Kong Daoist Association

The Hong Kong Daoist Association was formed in 1961. In 1967 it was registered as a limited company. In 1975 the association's office in Tai Nam Street, Kowloon, was inaugurated. At present there are sixty-one members.

¹¹ The Sheng Te Magazine Association is affiliated to a Dao Tang called Sheng De Bao Gong in Taichung, Taiwan.

The association runs three secondary schools, five primary schools and one kindergarten.

7. Financial Sources

The main source of income for most of the *dao tangs* comes from private donations. The biggest event is the auction of lanterns after the Chinese New Year. The lanterns bring wealth, children, health, or happiness to the family throughout the year. People will pay several thousand dollars for one lantern. Master Zeng's *dao tang* raises more than three hundred thousand dollars at each year's auction. The second largest source of income is perhaps from the charge for placing ancestral tablets on the altar. In some bigger *dao tangs* in the New Territories there are also places to put the ashes of the dead. On every first and fifteenth day of the lunar month, there are services in the *dao tangs* so that the spirits of the dead are well taken care of. Donations in the form of *xiang you qian* (money for incense and oil for lantern) are received throughout the year from people who come to worship the gods in the *dao tangs*.

8. Social Activities

a) Medical

Besides religious activities, many of the Daoist groups in Hong Kong are also active in social work and education. The Red Swastika Society, for example, performed many of the functions of the Red Cross in China during World War II. Most of the Daoist groups practise three forms of service to society: education, medical and relief work in the form of charity. Many *dao tangs* maintain a school for poor children and a clinic for those who cannot afford medical fees and drugs. The Xian Tian Dao was one of the earliest groups that organized homes for old people. This is a natural development, because the Xian Tian Dao has women's groups for Amahs. The Amahs are usually not married and have no children. When they retire, they come to live in the *dao tangs*. Many of the Daoist groups have homes for old people, such as the Yun Quan Xian Guan, the Qing Song Guan, and the Yuan Xuan Xue Yuan.

In the early 1950's and 1960's, providing medical service and drugs was a major task for many of the Daoist groups. They provided free Chinese herbalist services and herbal medicine. Some groups such as Xing Shan Zhen Tang, provided medical treatment by *fu ji*, and they also provided pills, oint-

ments and herbal tea packages made from prescriptions from *fu ji*. Due to the recent economic development in Hong Kong and the improvement of public medical services, free medical service and drugs by Daoist groups is declining in importance.

b) Education

Many Chinese charity organizations had the tradition of running free schools for poor children. There were a lot of these schools after the war in China, and in the 1950's in Hong Kong. Master Zeng's *dao tang* had a school in Kowloon in the early 1960's. The school was a private school. It was closed after two or three years because the building was too old and had to be rebuilt. Another school was set up in Wang Tau Hom resettlement estate. This was a roof-top school, situated on the roof of one of the resettlement buildings. The school was closed in the 1970's when the government's education policy changed. There were too many schools in that area and not enough school children. The schools run by the Hong Kong Daoist Association are all subsidized by the Education Department. This means that the Hong Kong Daoist Association provides funding for the school building and equipment, the Education Department pays for operating costs.

c) Relief Work

Daoist groups in Hong Kong were active in relief work, giving blankets to poor people in winter and food and clothing to refugees from China in 1962/ 63 when large numbers of refugees crossed the border due to a famine in China. Although one or two *dao tangs* may still be active in squatter areas in helping the homeless in the case of a typhoon or fire, in recent years relief work has been taken over by professional social welfare organizations (mostly Christian-orientated), or by the government. Amateur charity work is becoming less important.

9. Immigration

In 1987, the Zhi Shan Fo Dao She in San Francisco sent their representative to Hong Kong to discuss affiliation with Master Zeng's *dao tang* in Hong Kong. The San Francisco unit may be considered a branch of it.

With the increase in the number of immigrants to the U.S.A., Canada, and Australia, more and more *dao tangs* will be set up in these countries. In 1979/80 the Qing Song Guan started to build their branch temple near San Francisco. A few years ago, there were rumours that Huang Da Xian was going to emigrate. It was proved later that some immigrants from Hong Kong had set up a Huang Da Xian temple in New York City. Just as when they moved to Hong Kong after 1949, so now will more Daoist groups be established overseas following the increase of immigrants.

10. Conclusion

The *Dao tangs* in Hong Kong started as small groups. Many of them have developed into large temples over the last thirty years. They have served the Hong Kong society as charitable organizations. They are involved in social work, medical services, and education. Most of these Daoist groups have worked with people of the lower or lower middle class. They organized one of the earliest homes for old people. They take care of the Amahs who have no children of relatives to rely on when they retire. They have done a lot of relief work with refugees and people living in squatter areas. They fulfilled a need during the 1950's and 1960's in offering free medical services and drugs. In short, the Daoist groups have played a very important role in society.

In recent years, the Daoist groups in Hong Kong have had active contact with mainland China. They have donated money for repairing Daoist temples in China. The Chong Xu Guan and Jiu Tian Guan in Luo Fu Shan and the Ying Yuan Gong Temple in Guangzhou have been repaired with donations from more than eight Hong Kong Daoist groups.¹²

With the trend of emigration from Hong Kong, Daoist temples have been built in North America and Australia. But emigration has not yet created too much of a problem for the Daoist groups. A more serious problem is perhaps that there are not enough young people to succeed the older generation, both in religious practice, such as in fu ji or in charitable work. In Master Zeng's temple, for example, I was told that their fu ji was not as good as when Master Zeng was alive. Even in charitable work, they are not professional enough. They have not been able to compete with Christian organizations which provide social welfare services in a professional way.

Glossary

In Pinyin	In Characters	English Meaning
ba xian	八山	the Eight Immortals
Bei Di Temple	北帝廟	temple of the god of the north
cheng	言成	sincerity
Chong Xu Guan	冲虚観	a temple in Guangdong, South China
dao hao	道琥	a Dao name
dao shi	道王	Daoist monk
dao tang	道堂	a Daoist temple
fen tan	分壇	a branch altar or temple
fu	狩	charms
fu ji	扶乩	communication with spirits by means of the sand tray and wooden pen
Guan Di	關帝	also known as Guan Gong, the god of war
Guan Yin Temple	觀音廟	temple of the goddess of mercy
Hong Sheng Temple	洪聖廟	temple of the god of the sea

142

In Pinyin	In Characters	English Meaning
Hong Wan Zi Hui	紅萬字會	Society of the Red Swastika
Huang Shan	黄山	a mountain in An Hui Province
Huang Da Xian Ci	黄大仙祠	Temple of Huang Da Xian
ji shou	乱手	a medium who communicates with spirits by means of the sand tray and wooden pen
ji tan	礼壇	an altar where fu ji is practised
jiao	醮	a special offering ceremony to gods under a special altar
kan guang	看光	looking at the light, a kind of communication with spirits
Lu Zu Quan Ji	吕祖全書	collected works of Lu Dong-bin
Luo Fu Shan	罪浮山	a mountain in Guangdong
nan wu guan	喃哑館	daoist priest house
nan wu lao	南呼佬	daoist priest

Law Yu Fai

In Pinyin	In Characters	English Meaning
qi gong	氣功	a system of deep breathing exercises and meditation
Qing Song Xian Guan	青松仙觀	name of a Daoist temple
Quan Zhen	全真	literally meaning to get rid of illusions and to keep the origin. Also, the name of a sect of Daoism.
Qun Ying Tang	群英堂	the house of a group of heroes or elites
ru dao	入道	to enter into Daoist beliefs
shan xin	善信	believers
shaoji	育等	a basket made of bamboo
She She Yuan	查色围	name of a Daoist group
shi fu	師傅	the master
Tai Shang Lao Jun	太上老君	another name for Lao Zi
tang	学	a group, originally refers only to kinship groups
Tian Hou Temple	天后朝	temple of the goddess of heaven

Daoism in Hong Kong

In Characters	E LIN :
	English Meaning
土地	god of earth, god of the place
西椎山	a mountain in Guangdong
先天道	name of a sect, literally meaning the Dao before heaven and earth were divided
香油錢	money donated for incense and oil for lantern
省躬草堂	name of a temple
鸭旦教	duck egg religion
醫道還元	a medical book
應元宫	a temple in Guangzhou
圆多学院	name of a temple
雲泉仙館	name of a Daoist temple
簪冠禮	ceremony for putting on a hat
正 -	the correct one, name of a sect of Daoism
至大至尊	the highest and the most respectable
	西先 者 背鴨麗應圓雲簪 正

145