



Introduction

Voices from the Underworld is an in-depth study of the contemporary Underworld tradition in Singapore and Malaysia, where Hell deities are venerated in statue form and freely interacted with while embodied in their spirit mediums, *tang-ki* (童乩).¹ The ethnography focuses on the temple-based, spirit medium-centric ritual and material cultures that have come to prominence in these two locations since the turn of the century. The Chinese Underworld² and its sub-hells are populated by a bureaucracy drawn from the Buddhist, Taoist and vernacular pantheons. Under the watchful eye of Hell's 'enforcers', the lower echelons of demon soldiers impose post-mortals punishments on the souls of the recently deceased for moral transgressions perpetrated during their prior incarnations. Inspired by Buddhist cosmology, the tortures inflicted are karmic retributions, a necessary precursor to the transmigration of souls into a new form, human or otherwise. As such, the Chinese Underworld or Hell³ is distinct from the biblical Hell, and from Hells recognised by other religious traditions.

The contemporary Underworld tradition centres on two of Hell's most feared demon enforcers, Tua Ya Pek and Di Ya Pek, together known as Tua Di Ya Pek. Previously obscure figures in Chinese vernacular cosmology, following an inversion of religious antecedents from Heaven to Hell deity worship, and gradually rising to prominence in the second half of the twentieth century, Tua Di Ya Pek have now become the most frequently channelled deities in Singapore and Malaysia.

1 A Hokkien term literally meaning 'child diviner'.

2 As distinct from the Chinese 'criminal underworld'.

3 The two terms are used synonymously throughout the book, with 'sub-hells' denoting individual locations of post-mortals punishments.

Their unrivalled popularity in the local ritual arenas is therefore a twenty-first-century phenomenon, but is singular to these two locations. This raises the questions of how and why the worship of practitioners' own post-mortal torturers has become among the most predominant forms of contemporary religious expression in Singapore and Malaysia, while elsewhere in the wider present-day Chinese religious diaspora the Underworld and its pantheon remain ostensibly taboo. Addressing these questions, and with the intention of contributing to anthropological theory, I have applied a framework of analysis labelled 'self-perpetuating technologies of religious synthesis' which links developments in the religious landscapes to specific socio-political catalysts triggering the change. Thus, taking the comparative ethnography from Singapore and Malaysia as a single extended case study, the Underworld tradition serves as a vehicle to demonstrate an analytical framework which may be employed in diverse social, political, ethnic and geographic settings linking societal catalysts to new and evolving religious and esoteric trends. A full working explanation of self-perpetuating technologies of religious synthesis will follow in Chapter 2. As the modern⁴ Underworld tradition has evolved over approximately seven decades, the theoretical framework incorporates van der Veer's (2016) 'historical sociology'. That is, as "An anthropological perspective [...] based on historical materials as well as fieldwork that raises new questions and highlights differential patterns and their causes" (van der Veer, 2016: 9).

Throughout the book, while carrying the analysis, the ethnographic narrative is intended to provide the reader with unique insights into the lived tradition and into the cosmology upon which contemporary ritual practices are based. To achieve this, what have previously been regarded as conflicting approaches in the study of Chinese vernacular religion have been embraced. These include ontological and dialogic⁵ approaches to religious phenomena including *tang-ki* in trance possession states, combined with historical sociology and an interpretative societal analysis. The rationale behind adopting these methodologies and how they become complementary requires elucidation.

While there has been a convergence of anthropological discourses focused on the concept of ontology, there is still no one cohesive approach within the ontological turn (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017). Instead, one finds a gen-

4 'Modern' does not equate to 'modernity' in Hannerz's (1996) vision of a 'global ecumene' with a 'centre and periphery' but is used in a comparative sense to local religious antecedents.

5 See Tedlock & Mannheim's (1995) *The dialogic emergence of culture* for earlier examples, especially the 'Introduction', and DeBernardi's chapter 'Tasting the water' based on two chance encounters with Tua Di Ya Pek between 1979 and 1981.

eralisation of approaches which have been described as ‘the anthropology of ontology’ (Scott, M. W., 2013). This diversity allows for the selectivity of appropriate theories from within ontological discourse relevant to the subject studied and for further experimentation with ontological methodologies. Inspired by Descola (2013, 2014), M. W. Scott (2007, 2013, 2013a, 2016) and Pedersen’s (2012) recent discussions concerning ethnographic research into non-human worlds, I have adopted an ontological approach as an underlying methodological principle in researching efficacy in ritual, but *not* in the analysis of societal influences on the religious landscapes themselves, nor in the interpretation of meaning within them. Analytically, then, I am conceptually opposed to some positions taken by key proponents of the ontological turn, most notably to the notion that meanings “No longer need to be excavated, illuminated, decoded and interpreted” (Henare, Holbraad & Wastell, 2007: 4), and to “An anthropology that holds issues of interpretation at bay” (Henare, Holbraad & Wastell, 2007: 4). In contrast, I maintain that interpretation and meaning are integral both for practitioners and for academics researching systems of religious knowledge, and I do so for the following reasons. The differences in emic interpretations of cosmology between the Underworld traditions in Singapore and Malaysia; divergences in meaning actuated through the influence of distinct transnational cultural flows; and comparisons with developments in Chinese vernacular religion in Taiwan over a similar period all illustrate that meaning is time and location specific, and that interpretation is dependent on differing social and historical circumstances. Both meaning and interpretation are therefore entirely relevant to a comparative study.

Returning then to the ontological influences from which I have drawn, and the rationale behind these choices. Descola (2013, 2014) argues that cultural variation is not dependent of how a universal reality is represented but, rather, by which qualities and interrelationships traverse humans’ ontological filters and become actualised at any given time or place. This process of ‘ontological predication’, rather than producing multiple worldviews of the same complete reality (i.e., the social construction of reality), produces different ‘styles of worlding’. In other words, ‘ontological filters’ determine initial suppositions of what the world contains, including the numerous kinds of beings which populate it, and how these beings interact. As ontological predication involves only piecing together fragmentary elements from all possible existents, it effectively precludes multiple-worlds hypotheses and, in metaphysical terms, the hierarchical domination of one form of ontology or cosmology over another. Adding traction to this last statement, Paleček and Risjord (2012) have noted that if ‘things’ are the product of interactions between the human and non-human worlds, so too are ontologies,

and therefore “No one set of interactions could be regarded as the True Ontology” (Paleček & Risjord, 2012: 12). Applying this understanding ethnographically allows emic ontologies to maintain their integrity, meaning that alterity is to be taken seriously and, as far as possible, understood and represented on its own terms. With this in mind, I feel that rejecting emic perceptions of spiritual efficacy would render practitioners’ own claims absurd, thus alienating the social actors, and disengaging them from the discourse that emerges from the research. This, as Escolar notes, “Steals dignity from the events and from the subjects” (Escolar, 2012: 38), and this is a path I have chosen not to tread.

An approximation of this ontological approach has been labelled by Scott (2013) as ‘relational non-dualism’ or ‘flat-ontology’, where objects in the broadest sense, from humans to the discarnate, are relational and can metaphysically transform from one thing to another, thus negating the Cartesian law of non-contradiction. A human may therefore be a vessel for deities (a *tang-ki*); a deity (*shen* / 神) may animate an object through embodiment; and the embodied object may transform into a conduit for a deity’s efficacy. In contrast to anthropological dualism, which “Has helped to assert the cultural transcendence and political ascendancy of Cartesian-based truth claims over much of the rest of the world” (Scott, 2013: 863), relational non-dualism levels the playing-field and prevents the theft of integrity from practitioners, their cosmologies and ritual practices. In Descola’s terms, a religious tradition is “A system of incompletely actualised properties, saturated with meaning and replete with agency” (Descola, 2014: 277–278), and I treat Chinese vernacular religion as one such system.

In *Voices from the Underworld*, acknowledging relational non-dualism as an underlying principle while researching *tang-ki* in trance possession states allows the emic voice to be *literally* heard, and to be incorporated constructively into the ethnography. Moreover, this approach readdresses alterity in a way that removes the need to distance oneself philosophically from the religious and ritual phenomena studied. Within Sinology, and in regard to deities and *tang-ki* spirit possession in particular, the academic antecedent has been a denial of emic ontologies, from *tang-ki* “Who claim to have the ability to embody spirits of divine beings” (DeBernardi, 2006: 4) to “There is a kind of role-playing of what the gods might be saying if there were gods” (Jordan, 1972: 84). While utilising these quotes as examples, I mean in no way to detract either from the excellence of the two monographs or from their authors’ outstanding contributions to the field, but instead to highlight the potential of an alternative Sinology in the study of Chinese religion. In offering an alternative point of academic departure, this study aims to contribute to wider present-day anthropological discourse concern-

ing the interrelationships between sociocultural and spiritual worlds; human agency and the religious objectivation of cosmology; and to discourse related to de-stigmatising the very notion of spirit possession in the contemporary study of esoteric and religious traditions.

Allowing the emic voice to be heard is further facilitated by being “Prepared to learn theoretical lessons from the concepts used by the groups studied, and to adopt (perhaps modified) local concepts into anthropological theory” (Paleček & Risjord, 2012: 3). Otherwise put, by applying ontological and dialogic approaches to the study of religious phenomena, the ethnography is transformed from “Finding ways to question or otherwise qualify presuppositions that stand in the way of ‘grasping the native’s point of view’” (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017: 6), into a source of original anthropological theorisation. In this vein, inspired by Pedersen’s understanding of the ontological turn as being “Concerned with how anthropologists might get their ethnographic descriptions right [...] a technology of description which allows anthropologists to make sense of their ethnographic material in new and experimental ways” (Pedersen, 2012: 1–2), by analysing the emic voice, a new lexicon of terms to codify the multiplicity of emic descriptions which I encountered in the field has emerged.

For instance, in Chinese vernacular religion deities are depicted in statue form with specific identifiers, these commonly being weapons, decorative items and functional objects. In the Underworld tradition, Tua Ya Pek carries a rattan fan which is wielded as a power-object by *tang-ki* when channelling him. However, when asked, practitioners variously described Tua Ya Pek as “using his fan like a weapon” and replied that “Ghosts fear his fan – it has his power in it”, that “It is only powerful when held by Tua Ya Pek” and that “It contains *yin* energy”. When I pressed for clarification, in common with Jean DeBernardi’s earlier experience in Penang (DeBernardi 1995), I was most commonly advised to ‘ask the deity’ myself. Similarly, when discussing Tua Di Ya Pek’s efficacy, it was variously referred to as ‘*qi*’ (气) or invisible power, *ling hun* (靈魂)⁶ or soul, or simply as power drawn from the Underworld. Evaluating practitioners’ contrasting responses provided a starting-point for an analysis to locate appropriate terms for active agency within the tradition and for its transmission in ritual. Encapsulating the essence of these emic explanations, new terminology including ‘deific efficacy’, ‘discarnate efficacy’ and ‘deific embodiment’ arose recursively from the research.

This lexicon broadly offers a new and distinct set of descriptive phrases

6 *Ling hun* suggests the animating nature of the self, sometimes described as ‘life force’ or ‘vital’ energy’; see for example Wikan (1989) and Hook *et al.* (2004).

to concisely frame the metaphysical in religious and esoteric traditions in academic terms. From ‘deific efficacy’ to ‘post-mortal journeys of the soul’, the terminology generated may resonate within Sinology and the anthropology of religion, and in related subfields including the ‘anthropology of consciousness’ and the fledgling field of paranthropology. My hope is that this lexicon will be drawn on and further expanded by Sinologists, and by academics researching ritual, religion and spiritual, new age, occult and esoteric practices, to more uniformly describe emic understandings of the discarnate forces around which such traditions revolve.

The term ‘ethnography’ itself carries a multiplicity of methods and meanings and therefore requires clarification in regard to my fieldwork among *tang-ki* in trance possession states. I feel that first-hand experience of ritual is a crucial factor alongside observation, active participation leading to a contextual appreciation of a lived ritual tradition. Therefore, from the outset, rather than relying on second-person narratives, wherever possible, often stepping outside of my own comfort zone, I actively participated in *tang-ki*’s rituals either as the subject of a ritual or as an assistant. However, while Edith Turner claimed that to fully understand the religious experience researched, “‘Participant observation’ in the fullest sense requires taking the final leap and ‘going native’ in the most complete way possible” (Turner, 1993: 9), I consider this a leap too far, a leap inhibiting the likelihood of a subsequent objective analysis. Instead, alongside experiential participation, I have adopted a dialogic approach to the study of trance possession, “To engage intelligently, empathetically and respectfully” (Bowie, 2013: 25) with Underworld deities as channelled through their *tang-ki*. Influenced by “Cognitive empathetic engagement” (Bowie, 2013), a research methodology intended “To elucidate the object of study rather than become an exercise in self-reflection” (Bowie, 2013: 4), the dialogic approach has been utilised as a fundamental research tool allowing for personal communication and interaction with *tang-ki* before, during and after rituals. Intriguingly, once employed in the field, after *tang-ki* entered a trance possession state, the almost prerequisite social classifications of ‘the enthusiastic researcher’ and ‘the research subject’ became largely redundant alongside ‘the ontological other’.

A depth of familiarity with this ontological other was mutually nurtured over an eight-year period and has been rendered into print through the use of italics to indicate where I have both observed and participated in a ritual, and where recorded consultations, interviews and discussions with *tang-ki* in trance possession states have been reproduced in print. These dialogues have been included to variously illustrate the principles underlying Underworld deities’ popularity; recent developments in Underworld cosmology; the psy-

chological and physiological effects of trance possession; and to contextualise Tua Di Ya Pek's role as channelled through their *tang-ki* in the development of the ritual and material cultures built up around their veneration.

Their inclusion also attempts to respond to Tedlock & Mannheim's (1995) claim of a hierarchical imbalance between 'disciplinary discourse' and 'field discourse' in academic literature, and tries to do so on several levels. First, their reproduction clearly illustrates the dialogic practices upon which most ethnography is based. Second, they demonstrate how alterity may be thematically inversed in dialogue with possessed *tang-ki*, in effect, the ontological other rendering both practitioners and the trained academic the 'relative native'. Third, and of key import, the inclusion of extensive dialogues on issues, objects, rituals and cosmologies directly related to the study facilitates the possibility of further interpretations, insights and theorisations on the part of the reader after the event.

The emphasis on first-person dialogues in the ethnography also evokes insights into both the mindsets and the vibrant and often intense life-worlds of the religious practitioners described, thus affording the reader with as complete a picture as possible of the lived Underworld tradition. To further this end, the monochrome photographs and colour plates add a visual dimension to the ethnography. The dazzling colours of Chinese temple culture provide a visual feast, especially so the lingering images of *tang-ki* rituals, which are graphically and emotionally compelling. In 1973 Margaret Mead argued that it is an ethical responsibility of anthropology as a discipline to preserve records of disappearing 'irreproducible behaviours', and, given the rapidity of development in Singapore and Malaysia's social and religious arenas, the images reproduced capture a temporal snapshot of a lived tradition which is itself in an ongoing process of reinvention.

The book is based on over eight years of research, with continuous periods of fieldwork undertaken in Singapore in 2010, 2011 and 2014 and, sponsored by the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, in Malaysia in 2015 and 2016. Anxi Chenghuangmiao in Fujian Province, China was visited in 2014 and 2018, and the primary fieldwork sites were all revisited during shorter research trips in 2017 and 2018. Where possible, the fieldwork was undertaken in Mandarin and English. However, in trance possession states the native dialects of the possessing deities become the medium of communication, and I encountered various forms of Hokkien, including a seventeenth-century Anxi variation, as well as Hainanese, Cantonese, Tamil and Malay. As practitioners and temple visitors also hail from multiple dialect groups, several interpreters are commonly on hand during consultations and at major ritual events. Therefore, to ensure the accuracy of on-the-night translations, every interview cited was recorded and later transcribed by

local academics fluent in the particular dialect spoken and familiar with the religious tradition. A precise record of the dialogues was therefore produced incorporating the sometimes subtle nuances of insinuation, humour and irony, accompanied by detailed explanations of religious references to which *tang-ki* had alluded.

The structure of the book and outline of chapters

Voices from the Underworld is divided into four parts, each containing three chapters. Following a brief summary of the historical development of Underworld cosmology in Part I, Part II focuses on the Underworld tradition, its cosmology, rituals and material culture in Singapore. This sets a baseline of comparison against which the Malaysian tradition can be contrasted. Part III moves north to Malaysia and concentrates on the evolution of difference between the two Underworld traditions, and the unities and diversities in their ritual and material cultures, and illustrates differing interpretations of Underworld cosmology. Part IV brings together the histography and ethnography to draw conclusions regarding the where and why of the modern Underworld tradition's inception and the timeline of its subsequent geographic diffusion.

Part II: The Underworld tradition in Singapore

Chapter 4 begins by contextualising Underworld deity worship within the broader context of vernacular religion in the Chinese diaspora, and then presents a compendium of Tua Di Ya Pek's contrasting mythologies. The ethnographic narrative begins with an 'oil wok' ritual to prepare medicines for the elderly in Jurong, Singapore, introduces the Underworld tradition's material and ritual cultures and emic perceptions of Hell, and presents a detailed description of a *tang-ki* entering a state of trance possession. The analysis focuses on alcohol consumption and gambling as self-perpetuating mechanisms and, contrasting ethical codes, draws comparisons with Taiwan's ghost temples (Weller, 1999), which became popularised during a similar time period.

Chapter 5 contains two ethnographies emphasising the dialogic approach. The first revolves around a conversation with Tua Ya Pek discussing a new Underworld God of Wealth, and the internal logic underlying the creation of new deities in the expanding Underworld pantheon. The second details a ritual performed by Tua Ya Pek to speed the journey of an aborted 'foetus spirit' (*taishen* / 胎神) through the Underworld, and serves as a comparison to the manipulation of malicious foetus ghosts (*ying ling* / 嬰靈) in Malaysia

in Chapter 8.⁷ Following the foetus ritual, Tua Ya Pek's self-perceptions and physiological sensations while possessing his *tang-ki* are then discussed, providing first-person insights into altered states of perception during trance possession. Analytically, the chapter weighs up the effects of urban redevelopment and governmental promotion of religious harmony as catalysts to unique forms of temple networking and to Tua Di Ya Pek's far-reaching reinvention to explain why, in Singapore's contemporary religious landscape, Hell's enforcers are perceived as the most appropriate deities to approach for assistance both to the living and to the souls of the recently deceased.

Chapter 6 connects the Underworld tradition to graveyards through Lunar Seventh Month (Ghost Month) 'salvation rituals' performed in cemeteries for the souls of ancestors, aborted fetuses and wandering spirits. After outlining the Buddhist origins of Ghost Month and various taboos now associated with it, the ethnography moves to Singapore's Choa Chu Kang Cemetery. The narrative contains two sections, the first describing two distinct rituals in a cemetery plot set aside for babies and aborted fetuses, and the second following a temple's Seventh Month rituals, from applying for cemetery permits to the *tang-ki*-centric conclusion of their Seventh Month rituals. Analytically, the presence of Taoist priests in Singapore's Underworld tradition is assessed with reference to the decennial census, and revisions to the 'Master Plan' (1965) concerning cemeteries are explored as societal catalysts both to the popularisation of the Underworld tradition and to 2017's cemetery rituals in particular. These rituals are analysed in the context of Foucault's 'heterotopias' as 'everyday forms of resistance' (Scott, 1985, 1990) to new and controversial national land policies.

Part III: The Underworld tradition in Malaysia

Providing details from the 'Jade Record' (*Yuli chao chuan*), Chapter 7's ethnography is focused on a model reconstruction of the Underworld illustrating its Ten Courts and a selection of tortures in their sub-hells which has been built as a ritual space and place of worship. Located in Klang, Selangor State, Malaysia, Di Ya Pek's three-day birthday celebrations, which attracted approximately one thousand devotees, provides the chapter's ethnographic setting for the mass channelling of Underworld deities and their subsequent consumption of opium and alcohol alongside the channelling of multiple Chinese Heaven deities and Malay Datuk Gong. The two features

7 The distinction between 'foetus spirits' (*taishen*) and malevolent / malicious or vindictive 'foetus ghosts' (*ying ling*) is important in the context of the two Underworld traditions and will be discussed further in Chapter 8.

of analytical interest which arise from this are the transfiguration of religious norms and the formation of extensive ethno-religious communities based around Underworld deity veneration. The transfiguration materialises in two guises, the first being an inversion of authority in the 'Heaven-human-Underworld' hierarchy seen reflected in the interactions between the possessed *tang-ki*, and second being the mass consumption of intoxicants in temple settings. Both are analysed in the broader context of changing moralities and the role of ethnic self-identity in Malaysia's religious landscape and how, in addressing these issues, the Underworld tradition has become a locus of local community formation.

Moving south to the Muar district of Johor State during Ghost Month, Chapter 8 focuses on the comparative importance of City God temples in Malaysia, and the active role played by Anxi Chenghuangmiao in promoting the contemporary tradition. The first ethnography follows the finale of an elaborate Seventh Month salvation ritual at Muar City God Temple, with particular attention paid to the influence of Mahayana Buddhism and Thai vernacular religion on Malaysia's ritual and material culture. The latter manifests in the use of Thai *luk thep* dolls, appropriated to accommodate the souls of malicious foetus ghosts enlisted into the temple's Underworld spirit army during Ghost Month. As the Malaysian malicious foetus ghost is a reinvention both of vulnerable foetus spirits described in Chapter 5 and of foetus ghosts appropriated into Taiwan's vernacular tradition from Japan (Moskowitz, 1998, 2001), transnational cultural flows and the socio-political catalysts affecting them are introduced into the analysis. Returning to the creation of community, the second ethnography focuses on an event formally titled 'Anxi City God's cultural exchange'. Bringing together ten pairs of Tua Di Ya Pek, one pair from each Underworld court, channelled through their *tang-ki*, discussions with them reveal perceptions of post-mortal cosmology which are in conflict with their Singaporean counterparts. The analysis therefore compares societal catalysts triggered by Singapore and Malaysia's competing post-1965 political agendas to account for the divergences between the two Underworld traditions' cosmologies.

Returning to central Malaysia to describe two events, Chapter 9 serves to compare south and central Malaysia's Seventh Month ritual traditions. The first ethnography recounts a night-time luck-promoting 'coffin ritual' in Kuala Lumpur where participants lie in a coffin, symbolically dying and entering the Underworld when the coffin lid is closed and re-entering the world of the living as the coffin lid is removed. The ritual is described from the perspective of both participant and observer. As the coffin ritual was appropriated from contemporary Thai Theravada Buddhism, the analysis further examines transnational cultural flows. The second ethnography revisits Klang

to recount the ritual release of exorcised spirits which have been trapped in Guinness bottles and stored in the prison cell in the temple's Underworld recreation. Following their release, the chapter concludes by discussing Di Ya Pek's perceptions of the relative passing of time in the Underworld, and an alternative interpretation of the Chinese Underworld's creation.

Part IV: Tracing the origins of the modern Underworld tradition

Relocating to China, Chapter 10 centres on Anxi Chenghuangmiao. The temple's early history and its 1990 relocation from Anxi city centre to the Fengshan Scenic Tourism Area below the graves of Xie Bian and Fan Wujiu are critically investigated, as are its atypical Tua Di Ya Pek mythologies. Analysed in the context of the invention and commoditisation of tradition and of China's changing cultural policies, Anxi Chenghuangmiao's reinvention is associated with self-perpetuating its own City God tradition, and with Tua Di Ya Pek's recent overseas popularisation. Continuing this line of enquiry, the chapter concludes by describing the opening of a new annex in front of Xie Bian and Fan Wujiu's graves, an annex first conceptualised in Klang, Malaysia, and evaluating the contestation of meaning and counter-claims to provenance of the new ritual site.

Owing to the implausibility of Anxi Chenghuangmiao providing the tradition's genesis, Chapter 11 returns to Malaysia to trace the modern Underworld tradition's origins. Following a historical trail of oral accounts, the ethnography turns to 1950s George Town, Penang, and to legends surrounding Malaysia's eldest City God temple. In the absence of textual records, oral narratives present the earliest recollections of not only where but also how the modern Underworld tradition most likely began. Substantiated by a Tua Di Ya Pek mythology from George Town's eldest Underworld temple, local history and folklore converge, suggesting George Town as the modern Underworld tradition's most likely point of origin.

As neither Xie Bian nor Fan Wujiu's popular mythology originated in either Anxi or Penang, and allowing for the complexities of cultural transmission, Chapter 12, the final chapter, begins by proposing the most likely timeline and trajectory of the Underworld tradition's geographical spread, both in and between Malaysia and Singapore. The versatility of the framework of analysis is then demonstrated by being applied to religious developments over a corresponding timeframe in Taiwan to explain why a similar Underworld tradition has not developed there. The potential benefits of combining ontological, dialogic, participatory and interpretative approaches to the study of religious and esoteric traditions are then clarified and discussed, and final conclusions are drawn.

On a final note, Hanyu Pinyin has been used for the romanisation of both Mandarin and Hokkien terms, the choice of language coinciding with current local usage. Proper nouns, including the Chinese names of deities and their titles, of individuals and places, as well as the English names of scriptures, are printed in regular font. Other non-English terms, including the names of festivals, rituals, religious texts, key ritual objects and emic philosophical concepts, have been reproduced in italics, and for common nouns Chinese characters have been provided in parentheses on their first use.