

Article

The Spirit-Writing Movement in the Chaozhou Region: Response to Modern Crises (1840–1949)

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Abstract: The spirit-writing (*fuluan* 扶鸞 or *fujū* 扶乩) movement was a response to modern crises in the domain of Chinese popular religion. From the nineteenth century, spirit-writing cults sprang up throughout China and became a national religious trend. These cults were centered around moral reform promoted through spirit-writing and aimed to reorient traditional values. This article focuses on how the Chinese conceptualized modern crises as *jie* 劫 by means of spirit-writing, expounded crises in the local context, and reacted to these ideas and crises in their religious and social practices. In the Chaozhou region, the movement arose in the context of disasters, political chaos, and the transmission of foreign culture and religions from the late nineteenth century. Chaozhou spirit-writing cults discoursed on the concept of *jie* as their doctrinal foundation and endeavored to save the world by receiving moral revelations from deities. They regarded doing good deeds as a way of cultivation and urged people to perform good deeds to avert disasters. Through the planchette, they expounded the meaning of good deeds and enriched their crisis theories in their religious practice. The movement demonstrated the initiative of popular religion, interpreting and reacting to modern crises by using traditional soteriological notions and practices.

Keywords: spirit-writing; spirit-writing cults; modern crises; moral reform; crisis conceptualization; soteriological notions; doing good deeds; Chaozhou



Citation: Li, Guoping. 2023. The Spirit-Writing Movement in the Chaozhou Region: Response to Modern Crises (1840–1949). *Religions* 14: 429. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14040429>

Academic Editor: Thoralf Klein

Received: 15 January 2023

Revised: 8 March 2023

Accepted: 17 March 2023

Published: 23 March 2023



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1. Introduction

Spirit-writing (*fuluan* 扶鸞)¹ was an important device to connect the human and the spirit world in Chinese religious life. The device was used to compose morality books (*shanshu* 善書), also known as spirit-written books (*luanshu* 鸞書), from as early as the late twelfth century. The most famous and popular morality book, *The Tract of the Most High on Action and Response* (*Taishang ganyingpian* 太上感應篇), was created possibly by means of spirit-writing and became a Daoist classic. Since many early spirit-written books were incorporated into the Daoist Canon (Daozang 道藏) or composed or compiled by Daoist groups, the relationship between spirit-written books and Daoism has been an important topic and has been well discussed by scholars (see Kleeman 1994; Chen 1999; Goossaert 2015; Lai 2015). The *Scripture on the Original Vow of the Sovereign Lord of Zitong, Expounded by the Heavenly Worthy of Primordial Beginning* (*Yuanshi Tianzun shuo Zitong Dijun benyuan jing* 元始天尊說梓潼帝君本願經) was created after 1194 and was the earliest text now known combining spirit-writing, the salvation of humanity, and morality (Goossaert 2014, pp. 225–26; Wang 2020, pp. 64–65). In its soteriological account, spirit-writing became a technique for saving the world. After the *Scripture on the Original Vow*, many spirit-writing groups elaborated the early soteriology and created new ideas from the Song dynasty to the Republic. From the late sixteenth century to the early Qing, spirit-writing entered a golden age and became the most common technique to produce new religious knowledge and discourse (Goossaert 2022, pp. 176–226). From the mid-nineteenth century, the development of spirit-writing came to another golden age.

The modern period (1840–1949) witnessed the rise of the “new” spirit-writing movement. Various religious groups emerged and developed into influential movements in

the context of modern times. China was descending into chaos and Chinese society experienced many profound and unexpected changes. In this historical context, new spirit-writing groups emerged in each region and developed into a national religious movement. The nineteenth-century spirit-writing movement was a response to modern crises in the domain of Chinese popular religion. Over the past half-century, the history of spirit-writing cults (*fuluan jieshe* 扶鸞結社) from the nineteenth century to the present has been the subject of many studies, especially spirit-writing cults in Taiwan 臺灣. A pioneering study is *The Flying Phoenix*, which is a cooperation between a historian and an anthropologist. The authors placed Taiwanese spirit-writing cults in the Chinese tradition of spirit-writing and morality books, and began to reflect upon the prevalence of spirit-writing in modern Chinese sects (see [Jordan and Overmyer 1986](#)). Continuing this interdisciplinary study, historians and anthropologists increasingly focused on the nineteenth-century spirit-writing movement, mainly exploring upsurges of spirit-writing cults in different regions, such as Sichuan 四川 and Guangdong 廣東, and investigated existent spirit-writing groups in Taiwan and Hongkong (see [Clart 1996](#); [Wang 1997](#); [Shiga 2002, 2013](#); [Fan 2015](#); [Wang 2016](#)).

This article focuses on the spirit-writing movement in the Chaozhou region.² The Chaozhou region is located in the southeastern part of the Guangdong province and today roughly covers three prefecture-level cities—Shantou 汕頭, Chaozhou 潮州, and Jieyang 揭陽.³ This region is the home of Virtuous Teaching (Dejiao 德教), which has been a well-known and influential sect in Southeast Asia (see [Tan 1985](#); [Formoso 2010, 2014, 2020](#); [Chen 2016](#)). In Chaozhou, the spirit-writing movement arose in the late nineteenth century and reached its prime in the first half of the twentieth century. In this regional case study, I discuss how people conceptualized modern crises as *jie* 劫 by means of spirit-writing, expounded crises in the local context, and reacted to these ideas and crises in their religious and social practices. The present study contains three sections. The first section describes the rise of the nineteenth-century spirit-writing movement and its new characteristics. Zooming in on Chaozhou, I examine the local context where the movement arose and the interaction between its rise and the sense of crisis. Primarily based on twenty-seven of thirty-two extant local spirit-written books now known, the second section explores various interpretations of *jie* and soteriological ideas among Chaozhou spirit-writing groups. These interpretations and ideas demonstrated their sense of crisis and supported the rise of the spirit-writing movement. The third section discusses the interaction between spirit-writing groups' crisis theory and practice by using local spirit-written books, local gazetteers (*fangzhi* 方志), newspapers, and fieldwork data. Spirit-writing groups believed that performing good deeds can avert all kinds of crises. This section concentrates on charitable halls and the good deed of burying corpses and bones in Chaozhou. The good deed was common in Chinese history, but Chaozhou spirit-writing groups highly praised it and developed new special meanings in their practice.

2. The New Spirit-Writing Movement and Its Context

From the nineteenth century onwards, spirit-writing cults sprang up throughout China and became a new religious movement. These cults were centered around moral reform promoted through spirit-writing and aimed to reorient traditional values. Jordan and Overmyer argued that these spirit-writing cults were a response to modernity ([Jordan and Overmyer 1986](#), p. 288).⁴ Although spirit-writing cults were not an invention of the nineteenth century, they emerged from the context of modernity, growing into a national movement and developing many novel characteristics. As Clart points out, these cults were driven by a millenarian sense of mission, regarded moral exhortation as their very purpose of being, and were a product of the nineteenth-century movement of religious synthesis ([Clart 1996](#), pp. 15–17). These new cults reflected the convergence of two distinct aspects: eschatological discourse and charitable activism. Many new spirit-writing groups viewed charity as a way to cultivate themselves and redeem the world, and charitable halls adopted and transmitted eschatological ideas by creating and printing spirit-written books. Spirit-written books also demonstrated the spirit-writing cults' novelties. These books fre-

quently introduced common eschatological ideas, such as saving people at the kalpa of the Third Age (*sanqi mojie* 三期末劫), the Three Ministers⁵ proclaiming transformation on behalf of heaven (*sanxiang daitian xuanhua* 三相代天宣化), and Emperor Guan expounding teachings in the *gengzi* 庚子 year of the Daoguang 道光 reign (1840) (*Guandi gengzi feiluan chanjiao* 關帝庚子飛鸞闡教) (Fan 2015, p. 7; Wang 2016, pp. 655–64; Shiga 2010, pp. 237–40). These ideas were based on the prediction of the kalpa and reflected a strong sense of crisis.

Not only the sense of crisis, but the actual occurrence of crises stimulated the upsurge of new spirit-writing cults in each region. In the Sichuan province, early spirit-writing cults were motivated by social chaos and created many influential eschatological ideas (Takeuchi 1996, pp. 244–60). The *gengzi* (1840) revelation was the most important and took place in Longnü 龍女 Temple, Dingyuan 定遠 county, Sichuan province. It recounts how, in 1840, Emperor Guan as a savior prevented an apocalypse through a campaign of moral reform (Wang 2016, pp. 659–60). Other spirit-writing cults repeatedly connected themselves with the *gengzi* revelation and partly viewed this *gengzi* year as a starting point of the spirit-writing movement. When the movement began, however, is still open to debate, since what new spirit-writing cults created or reiterated in their texts overwhelmingly can be seen in earlier spirit-written books. It is definitely clear that the year 1840 is of profound significance to modern China. 1840 is regarded as the beginning of the First Opium War and the modern history of China. Although it is unclear to what extent the First Opium War affected the spirit-writing movement around 1840, the number of new spirit-writing cults kept surging after 1840 and reached a peak in the first half of the twentieth century. These new cults were certainly provoked by modern crises, such as the Taiping wars (1851–1864), the spread of foreign culture, and natural disasters. Goossaert points out that the production of spirit-writing texts rose to an unprecedented level from 1864 to the 1940s, and emphasized the profound influence of the Taiping wars (Goossaert 2022, pp. 273–90, 307). Using the case of Emperor Guan as a savior, ter Haar argued that the late nineteenth-century spirit-writing movement was a response to crisis. During this period, China went through many natural and man-made disasters, which caused people to worry about the end of times. People feared an apocalypse that would wipe out everybody who did not carry out moral reform. This apocalypse resulted from a perceived moral decline that was related to new developments in modern times, such as the New Policies of the early twentieth century, the growing impact of Christianity, and the presence of Westerners (Ter Haar 2017, pp. 233–44). In Guangdong, the bubonic plague from the late nineteenth century triggered many new spirit-writing cults, which actively provided disaster relief and sought divine advice and blessings by means of spirit-writing (Shiga 2013, pp. 206–15).

Considering crises on both local and national levels is crucial to our understanding of the spirit-writing movement in a certain region. In Chaozhou, the movement developed in the context of disasters, political chaos, and the transmission of foreign culture and religions. First, local disasters brought about the rise of new spirit-writing cults. From the end of the nineteenth century onwards, natural disasters continuously broke out in Chaozhou, for example, the cholera epidemics of 1883 and 1888, the bubonic plague (1894–ca. 1916), and the 1922 typhoon. Facing these calamities, local people prayed to deities for protection and help, and held religious rituals to avert disasters and expel evil spirits.⁶ In response to this demand, new spirit-writing cults sprang up and furthermore organized philanthropic activities, such as offering free medicine, providing free coffins, and burying corpses and bones. In 1894, the bubonic plague began to spread in Shantou and killed hundreds of thousands of people within the next 20 years (Kaba 2016, p. 98). The plague stimulated many spirit-writing cults, especially Patriarch Great Peak (Dafeng Zushi 大峰祖師)⁷ cults. In 1898, the local gentry worshipped Patriarch Great Peak in the city of Chaoyang (a. k. a. Miancheng 棉城) while the plague became popular and agitated local people. The Patriarch cult performed spirit-writing and provided medicine in many places. Its adherents claimed that numinous charms (*lingfu* 靈符) and elixir (*danshui* 丹水) from Patriarch Great Peak had saved innumerable lives. They first established an altar outside the east gate of Miancheng and named it Society for Reciting Buddha's Name (Nianfo she 念佛社). A

renowned businessman, Xiao Mingqin 蕭鳴琴 (1875–1908), initiated the construction of a new hall and submitted an application to the local authorities. With their approval, the followers of the cult built Mian'an Shantang 棉安善堂 in 1899.⁸ The following decades witnessed hundreds of similar cases. They were stimulated by local disasters, worshipped deities, and performed good deeds.

Second, modern China experienced many political reforms and revolutions which brought considerable changes and caused chaos. The 1911 revolution was the most influential movement, and it thoroughly changed China. The revolution also led to a long period of unrest in Chaozhou. Chaozhou was controlled by warlords and suffered from civil war after 1911. Local spirit-writing cults frequently mentioned the civil war in their texts and condemned the 1911 revolution as pointless, destructive, and chaotic. For example, a Chaoyang spirit-writing cult attacked the 1911 revolution: "It is sad that the revolution was ineffectual, and destroying discipline and abolishing law resulted in failure (傷哉革命無能, 亡紀廢法取敗) (*Yuban Yülü Jinzhang* 1944, p. 3b)". The Republican period was described as a time of chaos because of new political changes. Spirit-writing cults aimed to restore the world to an orderly state through moral reform by deities.

Third, the transmission of foreign culture and religions strengthened the awareness that Chinese culture was in crisis and aroused people to preserve this culture and participate in the spirit-writing movement. The unequal treaties concluded after the Opium Wars transformed many coastal cities into treaty ports. The Treaty of Tianjin (1858) stipulated that the city of Chaozhou should be additionally opened as a treaty port. The gentry and residents of Chaozhou disapproved of this decision and blocked the British consul from entering the city. After some negotiations, Shantou was selected as a treaty port in 1860 (Luo 2015, p. 10). This change accelerated the spread of foreign culture and religions and consequently gave rise to cultural conflicts. Local spirit-writing cults condemned the foreign invasion and guarded against the transmission of Western culture. One of their concerns was religion. After 1860, foreign missionaries had the authorized right to proselytize and build churches, which opened a new era for Christianity in Chaozhou (Xue and Li 2017, p. 253; Lee 2013, p. 68). The era witnessed the rise of missionary cases (*jiao'an* 教案) and anti-Christian sentiment (Xue and Zhu 2008, p. 696). The spread of Christianity aroused the Chaozhou people's awareness of religion. An early spirit-writing cult criticized Christian teachings and emphasized that "there is no teaching except the Three Teachings (三教之外, 無別教矣) (*Chongkan Jiujie Jindeng Quanbu* 1915, p. 81b)". In some places, these disputes developed into bloody conflicts. Around 1900, Patriarch Great Peak cults attacked Christian groups. John Marshall Foster (1857–1924), an American Baptist missionary, argued that Great Peak cults rose up against their new congregations and described how the cults destroyed their houses and religious objects in his report (Foster 1900a, p. 386). In his diary, Foster wrote, "It is said the Tāi Hong Hūe people are saying that their god has been petitioned by all other gods to punish those Christians who have deserted their shrines and ceased to offer anything to them (Foster 1900b, p. 30)". The term Tāi Hong Hūe was written in the dialect of Chaozhou and referred to the Dafenghui 大峰會, i.e., the Great Peak cult. Spirit-writing cults were motivated by deities to resist the expansion of foreign religions and regarded them as competitors.

Primarily in response to these crises, new spirit-writing cults increasingly emerged in Chaozhou and established varied organizations. Thousands of organizations emerged in the first half of the twentieth century and greatly enriched local religions. New cults arranged simple altars and performed spirit-writing in private houses and shops. They worshipped both local and national deities, such as Emperor Guan, Immortal Li Bai 李白, Patriarch Great Peak, and Immortal He Yeyun 何野雲. Revealed by these deities, new cults focused on moral reform and held rituals to eradicate disasters. They actively circulated eschatological ideas and recruited new members. Many cults expanded rapidly and were able to establish organizations, such as charitable halls (*shantang* 善堂), temples (*miao* 廟), nunneries (*an* 庵), palaces (*gong* 宮), pavilions (*ge* 閣), and immortal abodes (*xianguan* 仙館). Regardless of their varying titles, one activity that these institutions had in common was

receiving revelations from deities by means of spirit-writing. Part of their revelations were compiled as spirit-written books. In my fieldwork, I discovered thirty-two extant spirit-written books created in Chaozhou. Among these books, two were created between 1900 and 1909, six between 1910 and 1919, seven between 1920 and 1929, eleven between 1930 and 1939, and ten between 1940 and 1949.⁹

3. The Conceptualization of Crisis and Soteriological Ideas

In these local spirit-written books, the concept of crisis was a core theme and supported the rise of the spirit-writing movement. Spirit-writing cults continuously expounded on crises and repeatedly used the Chinese term *jie* 劫/ 劫 to describe them. They interpreted the origin of crisis in two ways. First, *jie* was regarded as punishment from Heaven because of the moral degeneration of the world. Since traditional teachings gradually declined and people committed all kinds of evils during the modern period, Heaven, usually the Jade Emperor, decided to destroy the world and sent down calamities. Second, in modern times, many spirit-writing cults were affected by sectarian ideas and propagated that the kalpa of the Third Age was approaching or had arrived. In this age, calamities were inevitable, and humanity was doomed to extermination; only the converted could be saved. This idea became popular in modern spirit-written books.

The discourse on *jie* was complex, which was directly reflected in its terms. Hundreds of terms were used and can be divided into two groups: general and specific. *Jie* and *zai* 災/ 灾 (calamity) were general terms and were used with a high frequency. Based on the two words, many compound words were created. Compound words meant that calamities were destined, like *jiyun* 劫運 (inescapable fates), *jieshu* 劫數 (destined disasters), *jiwang* 劫網 (encompassing calamities), and *zaixing* 災星 (unfortunate fates). New words were added to emphasize the seriousness of crises, such as *huozai* 禍災, *xiongzai* 凶災, *tianzai* 天災, *canjie* 慘劫, *dajie* 大劫, and *zaiyang* 災殃. The added components mainly mean “disastrous” (*huo* and *yang*) or “severe” (*da*, *can*, and *xiong*). The heavy usage of *jie* and *zai* constructed an atmosphere of crisis. Second, specific terms referred to calamities that people experienced or were suffering. A few terms were notional ideas, such as the kalpa of the Third Age; the Demon Kings of Wind, Fire, and Water (*feng shui huo mowang* 風水火魔王); and the retribution for bad deeds done in a previous existence (*yuannie* 冤孽). Many terms referred to crises in this world, like flood, war, “country in chaos” (*guoluan* 國亂), and “demolishing shrines and destroying temples” (*chaici mieyu* 拆祠滅宇). Moreover, specific terms emphasized that disasters were impending or had happened in the local area, like “disasters in the next year” (*mingnian zhi zai* 明年之災) and “disasters in Hongyang” (*Hongyang zhi zai* 洪陽¹⁰ 之災). These specific terms reminded people that they lived in a time of crisis and increasing disasters were impending in their own locality.

These diverse terms can be interpreted in different ways. Goossaert classified *jie* into three types: (1) “*jie* (or *jieshu* 劫數, *jiyun* 劫運) as individual disaster (even an illness), usually as punishment for a sin”; (2) “*jie* as a particular condition in which humanity is embroiled, notably collective hardships or disasters”; and (3) “*jie* (or *mojie* 末劫, *dajie* 大劫) as the end of this world (to be followed by a new kalpa)” (Goossaert 2014, pp. 222–23). This classification is more inclined to be ideal and is based on the scope of the influence of *jie*: individual, collective, and universal. A term, however, can have several meanings and should be interpreted in its context. In Chaozhou texts, *jiyun* can refer to an inescapable fate of the world, i.e., *sanqi jiyun* 三期劫運. *Dajie* frequently refers to disasters of famine, flood, war, or plague. Regarding frequency, most terms belong to the second and third types, and only a very few are of the first type which occurred in personal instructions. Furthermore, the form of *jie/zai* can be divided into two groups: worldly and spiritual. The worldly type consisted of knowable and experiential crises in this world. People experienced or were suffering from these worldly crises, such as diseases, wars, and famines. During the modern period, the transmission of foreign culture and ensuing changes became crises of the times as well. The spiritual type is conceptual and cannot be falsified, such as *yuannie* and the kalpa of the Third Age. These notions were internal causes of crises

in the world. Since the Demon Kings of Wind, Fire, and Water descended and wandered in the world under the order of the Jade Emperor (Yüdi 玉帝), disasters of windstorm, fire, and flood consecutively inflicted severe damage on people. Continuous disasters were also a new normal state in the Third Age. Last but not least, spirit-writing groups interpreted modern crises as heavenly punishment, opportunities for believers, or an inescapable fate. Heaven sent down calamities to punish people for moral degeneration. This was an essential idea in spirit-written books. Secondly, spirit-writing groups regarded calamities as divine examinations and urged believers to seize opportunities offered by these. They propagandized “extricating [oneself] from calamities” (*chaosheng jiewai* 超昇劫外) and “cultivating [oneself] whenever facing calamities” (*fengjie xiuchujie* 逢劫修出劫). *Jie* was also interpreted as an incarnation of a god and her/his cultivation (*xiulian* 修煉). Thirdly, *jie* was an inescapable fate to everyone since the modern period came to the Third Age. People can be saved through moral reform from deities. In brief, the connotation of *jie* was complex and its interpretation was diverse.

Spirit-writing groups aimed to save the world from *jie*. They regarded composing spirit-written books as the most important and effective way to achieve this. The completion of a book usually meant the prevention of calamities or transforming catastrophes into smaller disasters. This idea can be seen in terms and book titles. Common terms were *jiujie* 救劫 (saving from kalpa), *wanzai* 挽灾 (reversing disasters), *danzai* 擔灾 (bearing disasters), *jie jieyun* 解劫運 (dissipating inescapable fates), *xiao jieyun* 消劫運 (removing inescapable fates), *jie minzai* 解民灾 (dissipating people’s disasters), and *jie zaiyou* 解災憂 (dissipating sorrows of calamities). *Jiujie* was frequently used in book titles, such as *Jiujie jindeng* (*Golden Lamp for Saving [People] from Calamity*) and *Xinbian jiujie baoxun* (*New Collection of Precious Instructions on Saving from Kalpa*). In general, composing a spirit-written book contained three steps: depicting crises, taking an order from the highest-ranking deity, and providing revelations. When people faced multiple calamities and were exposed to an impending apocalypse, a presiding deity (*zhujiao* 主教) took an order from the highest-ranking deity to compose a spirit-written book as a way of salvation. Having the authority from the highest-ranking deity, the presiding deity invited hundreds of deities to provide moral texts and accomplish the task of composition.

Chaozhou spirit-written books can be divided into two types based on how deities obtain the authority to compose books by spirit-writing: under orders of the Golden Mother (Jinmu 金母) and under edicts of the Jade Emperor. The highest-ranking deity was a critical symbol for a cult and conferred power on other deities to compose books, which was a key factor to distinguish different soteriological notions. From the end of the nineteenth century onwards, many sects began to transmit doctrines and convert local people in Chaozhou. The Way of Former Heaven (Xiantian dao 先天道) became the most influential sect and established hundreds of halls in the first half of the twentieth century. Its sectarian ideas, such as the kalpa of the Third Age, saving primordial people¹¹ (*pudu yuanren* 普度原人), and the Golden Mother as the highest-ranking deity, profoundly affected local spirit-written books. *Jiujie jindeng* was an early spirit-written book in Chaozhou created under an order of the Golden Mother. The presiding deity, Patriarch Lü, visited the Jasper Pool three times to ask for an edict. Finally, the Golden Mother was moved and issued an edict (*yizhi* 懿旨) to authorize the book:

Facing the arrival of the Third Age together, all Buddhas come down from the Jasper Pool and take orders to transform [people] through their teachings. In each kalpa, Buddhas became different incarnations. They incarnate themselves as leaders of Three Teachings to call back all primordial ones. Today all are still lost and do not awaken, so I feel sympathy silently. Minister Lü has great mercy and is willing to save people on my behalf. [He] begs me to descend to save you, all living mankind. Composing this book is to illuminate teachings and sets a guideline for the 92 [myriad primordial ones]. 全逢三期至，諸佛下瑤宮，領旨開教化，劫劫而分形，化身三教主，度回眾原人。暨皆迷不醒，使我暗悲憫。呂卿

慈悲大，愿代余度人。懇請余下降，欲救尔蒼生。垂書明教化，九二為準繩。
(*Chongkan Jiujie Jindeng Quanbu* 1915, p. 46a)

In *Jiujie jindeng*, Patriarch Lü aims to save local people by averting impending calamities. It is the Jade Emperor who decided to cause calamities. This popular theme is combined with the above mythical account about the Golden Mother:

Yesterday the Jade Emperor issued an instruction that natural disasters would be sent down to Chaozhou. People in all directions could hardly escape. Fortunately, I bore the people's interests in mind, and strenuously begged for forgiveness in front of the imperial palace. But the Jade Emperor was displeased, and it was impossible to avoid disasters. Thanks to the Queen Mother opening a ray [of hope], she begged for moving disasters on my behalf. Even though the emperor's order has become lenient, disasters are still unavoidable. It is just a matter of choosing a place for them to occur. 昨天玉皇發訓諭，要降天灾到潮州。四方人民實難避，虧吾為民罣心頭。金闕殿前苦求赦，玉皇不悅劫難免。幸逢王母開一線，代余懇求解災憂。帝命雖寬劫難免，惟是擇地起波濤。
(*Chongkan Jiujie Jindeng Quanbu* 1915, p. 4b)

The Emperor Guan also implores the Jade Emperor's mercy:

Because the human mind is lost, and [people] abandon the five principles and sweep away the eight virtues, it is not surprising that natural disasters descend heavily. Emperor Lü and I together plead for the Jade Emperor's forgiveness so that he may issue an edict to the eastern land for the sake of universal salvation. 至此人心不醒，五端不修，八德掃盡，莫怪天灾重降。余為普度，一同呂帝叩求玉皇開赦，頒旨東臨。(*Chongkan Jiujie Jindeng Quanbu* 1915, p. 11b)

As the title *Jiujie jindeng* shows, this book was regarded as a golden lamp to guide and save local people from *jie*. *Jie* not only refers to the end of the world at the Third Age, but also to concrete calamities such as flood, drought, and war. In the book, the Jade Emperor acts as a solemn ruler to punish humanity; the Golden Mother showed mercy toward humanity and was waiting for her children. This mythical pattern exerted a profound impact on other local spirit-written books, for example, *New Book for Awakening the World* (*Jueshi Xinpian* 覺世新篇) and *New Collection for Awakening the World* (*Xingshi xinbian* 醒世新編).

The local soteriological idea that the Jade Emperor acted as the highest-ranking deity was considerably influenced by popular morality books from outside of Chaozhou. The pattern was that the Jade Emperor decided to punish humans owing to the degeneration of morality, but many gods implored the Jade Emperor's forgiveness and he allowed them to save humans through the moral reform taught by spirit-writing. Consequently, these local spirit-written books focus on moral reforms and emphasize the significance of traditional values, like benevolence, filial piety, righteousness, and loyalty. According to Wang Chienchuan, Emperor Guan, Patriarch Lü, Wenchang Dijun, and Bodhisattva Guanyin play special roles in asking for jade decrees in many popular books (Wang 2016, pp. 655–56). These gods became a link between the Jade Emperor and the local people. The theme that Emperor Guan proclaimed transformation on behalf of heaven laid a foundation for Chaozhou books. In the *Precious Scroll for Revering Goodness* (*Shanzong Baojuan* 善宗寶卷), Emperor Guan claims that he shouldered the task of saving humanity and presented the petition of disciples to the Jade Emperor (*Shanzong Baojuan* 1922, pp. 12b–13a). Furthermore, Patriarch Lü and Bodhisattva Guanyin frequently act as presiding deities and ask for orders from the Jade Emperor; for example, the *Collection for Preserving Mind of the Pavilion to Greet Immortals* (*Yingzhenge cunxinlu* 迎真閣存心錄) was created by a Patriarch Lü cult. A popular theme is that Patriarch Lü, an Inner Minister, saves humans by means of spirit-writing, which became the background of *Cunxinlu*. Patriarch Lü explains why he gave instructions as follows:

Recently, teachings of the divine way have declined gradually, and evil doctrines flourished quickly, so Heaven on high is enraged and specially orders ghost sol-

diers and demon generals to eradicate evil people. The havoc in the future will be a wretched sight such as you have never witnessed before. If you want to take refuge and avert calamities, only accumulating good deeds and practicing benevolence can resist it. 近者神道之教漸衰，邪說勃興，以致上天震怒，特遣陰兵魔將，肅清匪類。將來災害之慘酷，為諸生所未目睹。倘欲避難消災，唯有積善行仁以抵之。 (*Yingzhenge Cunxinlu Chuji* 2002, p. 9)

Besides the above-mentioned transregional deities, local deities also asked for edicts from the Jade Emperor. In the *Song Buddhist Patriarch Great Peak's True Scripture for Saving from the Apocalypse* (*Song Dafeng Fozu jiuji zhenjing* 宋大峰佛祖救劫真經), the Jade Emperor authorizes Patriarch Dafeng to build charitable halls and compose books.

Chaozhou spirit-writing groups restated popular soteriological notions as their doctrinal support. Influenced by morality books from outside of Chaozhou, local spirit-writing groups primarily restated popular soteriological notions, such as the kalpa of the Third Age and the Three Ministers proclaiming transformation on behalf of Heaven. The creation of local spirit-written books was even regarded as a continuation of popular morality books outside of Chaozhou. *Jiuji jindeng* was viewed as a continuation of *Guanyin jidu benyuan zhenjing* 觀音濟度本願真經, *Jiuji baoxun* 救劫寶訓, and *Jueshi zhenjing* 覺世真經 (*Chongkan Jiuji Jindeng Quanbu* 1915, pp. 5a, 8b). Since these popular morality books failed to awaken the human mind, *Jiuji jindeng* was composed to save the world. The popular morality books became the basis of Chaozhou spirit-written books. What Chaozhou spirit-writing groups preached was similar to the popular books and seemed to consist of platitudes. The local accounts of popular soteriological notions, however, were the mainstay of Chaozhou spirit-written books and plausibly supported the argument that composing spirit-written books can save the world. They also conferred sacredness on local spirit-writing cults' activities.

4. Crisis Theory and Practice

Spirit-writing cults established many organizations to practice their salvational ideals. One of their preferred forms of organization was the charitable hall/society (*shantang* 善堂/*shanshe* 善社), especially for Patriarch Great Peak cults. *Shan* (goodness/charity) was a core concept in their doctrine of salvation: "As goodness is the foremost leader of all principles, people must revere it (夫善為萬綱領首，為人不可不宗)" (*Shanzong Baojuan* 1922, xu 序, p. 1a). Spirit-writing cults repeatedly emphasized the significance of goodness and urged people to do good deeds in order to avert calamities. As a display, they frequently used the Chinese character *shan* in their organization titles. *Shantang/shanshe* became popular in Chaozhou and possessed special meaning in salvation. In the *Song Buddhist Patriarch Great Peak's True Scripture for Saving from the Apocalypse*, Patriarch Great Peak describes how he built charitable halls under an order of the Jade Emperor:

I have observed and learned that the morals of the world have become abnormal, and that the human mind has become careless. When Heaven sends down calamities, good and evil [people] will not be distinguished in the world. I have boldly presented a memorial [to the Jade Emperor] and have been granted a decree to establish charitable halls and compose the *True Scripture* to save living people universally. 本道觀知世道反常，人心不苟，天降劫難之期，四方善惡不明之分。余冒奏准旨，建立善堂，著出《真經》普渡世人。 (*Song Dafeng Fozu jiuji zhenjing* 1933, p. 1a)

Charitable halls were viewed as places that distinguished benefactors from the rest of the world.

Centered around the concept of goodness, spirit-writing groups regarded doing good deeds as a way of self-cultivation. Charitable halls became perfect organizations for their cultivation. From the end of the nineteenth century onwards, spirit-writing cults began to establish charitable halls when the bubonic plague sprang up in Chaozhou. The first half of the twentieth century witnessed an upsurge in charitable halls (Xu 2006, pp. 119–57; Liu

2017, p. 30). Many halls were motivated by local disasters and focused on relief work. In 1922, Chaozhou was hit by a violent typhoon and more than 34,000 people were killed (Rao 1949, *Dashizhi san* 大事志三, p. 5a). Charitable halls immediately established offices for disaster relief (*jiuzai gongsuo* 救災公所) and dispatched members to provide relief, primarily burying corpses (Weng and Xu 1989, p. 142; *Chenghai Zhanglin Ba'er fengzai tekan* 1922, pp. 3, 6, 13). By means of spirit-writing, a spirit-writing cult explained the typhoon according to its theory of crisis. The typhoon was interpreted as a heavenly punishment: the Demon Kings of Wind, Fire, and Water had been appointed to eradicate evil people and purify the world (*Guansheng Dijun Quanxiaowen* 1922, pp. 2a–2b). In response to the heavenly punishment, spirit-writing groups advocated and presided over many charitable activities, such as reprinting morality books, offering free medicine, collecting paper with characters (*shizizhi* 拾字紙), burying corpses and bones, building roads and bridges, organizing fire brigades, and building hospitals. Spirit-writing groups absorbed both traditional good deeds and new forms of philanthropy in their self-cultivation and gave them religious meaning through the planchette.

Spirit-writing was indispensable to their self-cultivation. Burying corpses and bones was a popular charitable deed and typically reflected the great significance of spirit-writing. In Chaozhou, it was usually known as *xiuku* 修骷 (refining restless bones), *xiugu* 修孤, *xiukulou* 修骷髏, *xiushan* 修山, and *xiubaixing* 修百姓, and was regarded as the ideal philanthropic behavior. During the modern period, many spirit-writing cults organized large-scale burying projects, collecting a considerable number of corpses and bones and burying them in public tombs (*Chaoyang xian gongmu yizhong diaocha tongji biao* 1936, pp. 21–35). As Formoso has argued: “Even if the bones provide the physical focus for purification and their manipulation strengthens the yang potency of the bone gatherers, the main aim of the ritual is, however, to transfer wandering, dangerous, and polluting souls to the otherworld (Formoso 2009, p. 495)”. *Xiuku* was a ritual to save restless ghosts, and through the ritual, cult members could at the same time cultivate themselves and accumulate merits. In the ritual, the cult members had to abide by divine instructions from the presiding deities by means of spirit-writing. In the beginning, the members burned a memorial (*fenshu* 焚疏) to call upon the deities and ask them to give instructions on the ritual of refining restless bones, or alternatively, the deities exhorted members to practice the ritual through the planchette (*Jueshi Xinpian* 1931, p. 1a; *Dumi Huawu Xinbian* 1938, p. 4a). When the members started their work, they built a temporary altar devoted to deities, which was called the “place for refining restless bones” (*xiukuchang* 修骷廠). This altar was located near their public tombs where all urns were buried. At the altar, the members primarily made sacrifices to deities, performed spirit-writing, and chanted sutras each day. During the ritual, spirit-writing was a key tool, and the members had to follow the directions given by the presiding deities, such as where to search for abandoned tombs and dig out bones, how to deal with the bones, and when to start construction. Through spirit-writing, the deities instructed participants on how to perform a variety of rituals, like saving ghosts (*chaoyou* 超幽), and continuously encouraged them to persist in this great good deed.

Meanwhile, the meaning of burying corpses and bones was elaborated. The composition of *Jiujie jindeng* originated from the ritual of refining restless bones and was approved by an edict from the Golden Mother. The edict described the miserable situation of ghosts in the netherworld and emphasized ghosts needed salvation since they were the primordial ones as well (*Chongkan Jiujie Jindeng Quanbu* 1915, pp. 45b–46a). This idea became a common soteriological notion in local spirit-written books and was known as saving the worlds of both the living and the dead (*yinyang tong du* 陰陽同度, *yinyang liang du* 陰陽兩度, *pudu yinyang* 普度陰陽, or *duyin duyang* 度陰度陽). The presiding deity, Patriarch Lü, explained the meaning of refining restless bones as follows:

Currently, refining restless bones can move ghosts in the netherworld. You, good devotees under the altar, should understand [the meaning of] saving the worlds of both the living and the dead. It is not I that arbitrarily come to the spirit-writing altar. [I] hope that you take good vows immediately, accumulate hidden

merits together, and convert primordial ones from all directions on my behalf. 此時修骷，感動陰曹鬼族。尔等壇下善信，須明陰陽兩度，非本仙無故亂上乩壇也。但願尔等早立善願，同積陰功，代余化度十方原人。 (*Chongkan Jiuji Jindeng Quanbu* 1915, p. 5a)

Patriarch Lü instructed participants that the work of refining restless bones saved ghosts and became their merits. Many spirit-writing groups participated in refining restless bones and expounded on the idea of saving the worlds of both the living and the dead. Through the planchette, deities repeatedly revealed that the ownerless bones had been in a miserable situation; for example, they were exposed to the sun and rain and lacked sacrifices. As a result, their souls had endured much suffering. The cult members reburied the ownerless bones in public tombs and offered sacrifices to them. This work changed the state of the bones and was the first step to save ghosts. The next step was to summon the ghosts so that they could disclose their misdeeds by way of spirit-writing. Their repentant statements were warnings for the living, and in this way, the ghosts contributed to the composition of morality books. The ghosts were therefore able to accumulate merits and reduce their penalty in the netherworld. By using spirit-writing, the meaning of refining restless bones was continuously emphasized and amplified. The *New Book for Awakening the World* stated that “the way of refining restless bones is beneficial to the world (修骷一途乃天地之功用) (*Jueshi Xinpian* 1931, p. 1b)”. The ritual of “refining restless bones” could save ghosts, move the mind of Heaven (*tianxin* 天心), and prevent impending disasters. In the *Precious Scroll for Revering Goodness*, refining restless bones was considered the best way to do good deeds (*zui shan zhi shanshi* 最善之善事) (*Shanzong Baojuan* 1922, p. 27a).

This best good deed, however, was dangerous, especially when plagues occurred. If the members were infected and died, their deaths would raise doubts about their merits. Through spirit-writing, the deceased members could be deified, which provided a plausible explanation for such deaths. This is certainly true in the case of Yang Guangde 楊廣德, who piously performed this good deed to accumulate merits, but he died of the bubonic plague in 1902 when he was burying corpses. Through the planchette, Yang Guangde revealed the following:

Since there were many disasters in Chaoyang and Puning at that time, benevolent believers made charitable vows and formed associations everywhere to widely perform charitable deeds. As we come from poor families, how can we accumulate great merits? With the guidance from our master, [we] always kept expediency in mind, and the key point was benefiting abandoned bones. 因彼時潮、普兩界，劫災疊疊。各方善信，立發善心，處處結社，宏興善舉。吾輩清貧之家，何能修出高厚之功。因蒙師指，常存方便之心，澤在孤骸要切。 (*Chongkan Jiuji Jindeng Quanbu* 1915, pp. 39b–40a)

Burying corpses and bones was highlighted as a practical way for poor cult members to succeed in their cultivation. Yang’s demise caused controversy concerning divine retribution, but Yang Guangde revealed that he continued to cultivate himself and had become a deity in order to prove the impartiality of Heaven’s way (*tiandao wusi* 天道無私) (*Chongkan Jiuji Jindeng Quanbu* 1915, pp. 40a–b). In a nutshell, spirit-writing was a technique to support the good deed by giving ritual instructions, creating the meaning of refining restless bones, and providing divine sanction.

5. Conclusions

The spirit-writing movement was a response from within Chinese popular religion to modern crises. The movement demonstrated the initiative of popular religion: interpreting and reacting to modern crises by using traditional soteriological notions and practices. The movement was both a local phenomenon and a nationwide trend which originated in the long text tradition of morality books, stimulated by unprecedented changes in modern times. From the nineteenth century onwards, new spirit-writing cults sprang up throughout China, aiming to save the world from *jie* and focusing on the moral reform promoted

through spirit-writing. They were stimulated by various disasters and displayed a strong sense of crisis. In Chaozhou, local people experienced great changes during the modern period and attempted to overcome their subsequent difficulties in life through religious belief. New spirit-writing cults developed in the local context of disasters, political chaos, and the transmission of foreign culture and religions, and integrated with local society and culture.

In response to modern crises, spirit-writing cults adopted the concept of *jie* as their doctrinal foundation. The spirit-writing movement was associated with all kinds of *jie* in the past, present, and future. *Jie* was regarded as punishment from Heaven because of moral degeneration in the world, and was inevitable since the modern period came to the Third Age. Through the planchette, spirit-writing groups gave a detailed explanation of *jie*. The terms used to conceptualize *jie* can be divided into general and specific groups. General terms constructed an atmosphere of crisis, and specific terms reminded people that they were living in a time of crisis. Regarding the influential scope of *jie*, crises could occur at three levels: individual, collective, and universal, i.e., individual disasters, collective hardships, and the end of this world. Crises thus encompassed a spectrum reaching from personal circumstances to a cosmic scale. There existed worldly and spiritual forms of crisis. The worldly type was knowable, based on experience, and external to the human mind. The spiritual type was internal to the human mind. Nonetheless, all forms of *jie* were understood as heavenly punishment and inescapable fate, but also as offering opportunities for believers.

Facing multiple kinds of crises, spirit-writing groups endeavored to save themselves and the world. They emphasized the importance of moral reform and traditional values, and the belief that receiving moral revelations from deities was unique to salvation. Under orders of the Jade Emperor or/and the Golden Mother, they composed spirit-written books as the most important and effective way to save the world. Chaozhou spirit-writing groups primarily restated popular soteriological notions as their doctrinal support and conferred sacredness on their activities. After the books were completed, they professed the prevention of calamities or the transformation of great catastrophes into smaller disasters. During composition, spirit-writing groups were motivated by divine revelations, focused on self-cultivation, and accumulated merits through doing good deeds.

Spirit-writing groups regarded doing good deeds as a way of cultivation and urged people to perform good deeds to avert disasters. Spirit-writing groups expounded the meaning of good deeds and enriched the theory of crisis in their religious practice. The case of burying corpses and bones demonstrated the significance of spirit-writing. Generally speaking, burying corpses and bones was a traditional good deed with strong Confucian connotations, but at a local level, it helped to promote the spirit-writing movement. Most spirit-writing cults performed this good deed, while a few cults completely focused on “refining restless bones”. By means of spirit-writing, the ritual of refining restless bones was designed as an important task that was assigned by deities and was the best way for cult members to accumulate merits.

Funding: This research was funded by Guangdong Provincial Humanities and Social Sciences Foundation (Guangdong sheng sheke) No. GD21TW04-02 and Shantou University No. STF21019.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ *Fuluan* (“supporting the phoenix”), a.k.a. *fujū* 扶乩 (“supporting the stylus”), was a technique to connect the human and the spirit world. In spirit-writing séances, two spirit-writers (*jisheng* 乩生) held a stylus (*jibi* 乩筆) to write in a sand (alternatively incense ashes or water) tray. Sometimes only one spirit-writer held a stylus to write characters. The stylus is usually a Y-shaped

wooden instrument, commonly made from a forked branch of willow or peach. A spirit-writing séance usually required a team, including spirit-writer, reader (*baozisheng* 報字生), and scribe (*chaozisheng* 抄字生). In general, two spirit-writers wrote down characters, a reader loudly read out the characters, and a scribe recorded the characters.

2 There were several pioneering works: Shiga (2008, 2010, 2012a, 2012b).

3 In this article, Chaozhou refers to a cultural region, and its scope was roughly identical to Chaozhou prefectural (*fu* 府) in the late Qing, including nine counties and one subprefecture (*ting* 廳): Haiyang 海陽, Chaoyang 潮陽, Jieyang 揭陽, Raoping 饒平, Huilai 惠來, Dabu 大埔, Chenghai 澄海, Puning 普寧, Fengshun 豐順, and Nan'ao ting 南澳廳. Chaozhou city refers to the prefecture-level city, i.e., Chaozhoufu 潮州府.

4 According to their descriptions, modernity refers to a changing cultural situation where old values and beliefs are being abandoned, transformed, or attacked (Jordan and Overmyer 1986, pp. 12–13).

5 The Three Ministers refers to the Imperial Lord Sage Guan (Guansheng Dijun 關聖帝君), the Imperial Lord of Reliable Succor (Fuyou Dijun 孚佑帝君), and the Imperial Lord Wenchang (Wenchang Dijun 文昌帝君).

6 *Nongjia shuyao* 農家述要 (A brief account of farming households), *Lingdong Ribao* 嶺東日報, 27 September 1902; *Zun shen she jiao* 遵神設教 (Establishing teachings followed by deities), *Lingdong Ribao*, 5 March 1903; *Etang chuxian* 惡堂出現 (Emergence of evil halls), *Lingdong Ribao*, 7 October 1903.

7 Dafeng was originally a monk who regarded doing good deeds as a way to cultivate himself. He died of exhaustion in the Shaoxing reign of the Song dynasty (1131–1162) when he spared no effort to build the Heping Bridge 和平橋 in Chaoyang. Consequently, the local gentry built the Hall for Rewarding Virtue (Baodetang 報德堂) to commemorate and worship him. During the modern period, the worship of monk Dafeng developed into Patriarch Dafeng cults, from a little-known deity in a village to a household name in Chaozhou and Southeast Asia.

8 *Zhaozao liuzong* 肇造留蹤 (1913), erected in the front of Mian'an Shantang.

9 Four books are counted twice: *Jiujie jindeng* 救劫金燈 (1903–1904, 1910), *Shanzong Baojuan* 善宗寶卷 (1919–1920), *Puhua xinjian* 普化新篇 (1919, 1920), and *Xinbian jiujie baoxun* 新編救劫寶訓 (1926–1935).

10 Hongyang was the city of Puning county and was the place where *Jiujie jindeng* was composed.

11 Humanity was designed as primordial people/ones, who are children of the Venerable Mother and need to be saved.

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