

Lecture 2

The Gods as Agony Aunts

Divination, Individual Problem-Solving, and Popular Religion in Contemporary Taiwan



南投市藍田書院濟化堂

2pm, 12 May (Thursday), 2022

Room 1.02, Faculty of Classics, Sidgwick Site, University of Cambridge (in-person)

One of the most fundamental questions in Religious Studies surely is: “What do people believe?” Yet it is also one of the trickier ones to answer. Two common methods are interviews and questionnaires. The former can chart a particular individual’s belief system; the results of a large number of interviews with a representative selection of individuals may be extrapolated and produce a picture of typical beliefs held in a larger population. This kind of survey can, of course, also be achieved by means of questionnaires, and social scientific studies of religious beliefs typically combine both methods by using a large number of questionnaires to gain an overview and identify key groups from which individuals need to be selected for in-depth interviews. These methods have one key problem: They are initiated by researchers and tend to emphasise notions and questions that are relevant first of all to them, and not necessarily to the research subjects. While this bias may be addressed by using unstructured or semi-structured interview formats, these tend to produce data that are not easily comparable and generalisable. The lecture introduces a different body of data that holds great promise for the study of popular beliefs, consisting of thousands of records of individual divination sessions published in the magazines of Taiwanese spirit-writing cults, so-called phoenix halls (*luan-tang* 鸞堂). These texts were initiated not by researchers, but by believers themselves in the form of questions posed to the presiding deities of the phoenix halls in question, and can thus be assumed to reflect faithfully the religious concerns of the individuals in question. At the same time, the large number of such records makes it possible to categorise and tabulate the questions (and their answers) and derive from them a general view of key notions and issues in popular belief in Taiwan, of the relative importance of particular beliefs, and of their changes over time in the recent past.