CROSS-CURRENTS
EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

Li Yujie and the Rebranding of the White Lotus Tradition

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Abstract

Li Yujie (1900–1994) was a walking contradiction: a student leader of the Shanghai May Fourth movement and a Guomindang member and technocrat in the Nanjing government, but also a cadre in Xiao Changming's redemptive society—the Heavenly Virtues Teachings—and eventually the founder of two redemptive societies in his own right (the Heaven and Man Teachings and the Heavenly Emperor Teachings). Through a biographical study of Li Yujie, this article examines the complex appeal of redemptive societies to parts of the educated elite during China's Republican period. The author focuses particularly on the period between 1937 and 1945, when Li retired to the sacred mountain of Huashan. There, with the help of Huang Zhenxia, a self-taught intellectual also employed by the Guomindang, Li sought to modernize the "White Lotus" teachings that he had received from his master by incorporating scientific insights received via spirit writing. Li believed that he was creating a new religion more adapted to the twentieth century. Both the texts produced on Huashan and the military and political elite that were attracted to these texts allow us to raise new questions about secularism and religion, traditional beliefs and science in the context of Republican-period China, thereby suggesting that the conflict between the modernizing state and traditional religious culture was not always as stark as we have believed it to be.

Keywords: Li Yujie, Xiao Changming, White Lotus, redemptive society, science and religion, Republican era, Nanjing decade

Introduction

China's interwar period saw the flourishing of what some scholars (Ownby 2016; Goossaert and Palmer 2011, ch. 4) have called "redemptive societies," new religious movements that preached traditional Chinese spiritual teachings to those seeking moral direction and community. The best known and most important such group is undoubtedly the Yiguandao, one of the few to survive into the twenty-first century. However, during the interwar period, there were perhaps a dozen redemptive societies well established nationally, and many others active locally.

Many redemptive societies offered a rebranding, or repackaging, of what we have traditionally called the "White Lotus sectarian tradition," a form of popular religion increasingly widespread during the Ming and Qing dynasties but with origins that go back considerably further in Chinese history (Overmyer 1976, 1999; Naquin 1976; Ter Haar 1992). Groups attached to the White Lotus sectarian tradition worshipped the Eternal Venerable Mother (*wusheng laomu* 無生老母), a heavenly god who awaited the return of her children, who would be saved from the imminent end of the world by the Maitreya Buddha or other divine figures dispatched by the Mother for that purpose. Because of its millenarian teachings and occasional connection with peasant uprisings, the White Lotus tradition was banned under the later dynasties as heterodox, and redemptive societies were occasionally criticized as "superstitious" by the Republican government, particularly during the Nanjing decade. That said, the vast majority of White Lotus groups under the dynasties were peaceful and integrated into the culture and institutions of rural and urban society, as were most of the redemptive societies in the interwar period; they appealed chiefly to the culturally conservative elements of China's urban middle classes. The repackaging of the White Lotus sectarian tradition offered by the redemptive societies included (often) the notions of the Eternal Venerable Mother, an imminent apocalypse, and the possibility of salvation through society membership—but the societies also incorporated Christianity, Islam, and modern science into their message, although the emphasis remained consistently on traditional Chinese spiritual values and practices. At a discursive level, redemptive societies acknowledged the existence of the modern, outside world, and insisted on the continuing relevance of China's tradition in the face of radical changes; in this way, redemptive societies represented a countercurrent to the iconoclasm of the New Culture movement and other such revolutionary trends. Scholars such as Prasenjit Duara have examined their marriage of convenience with the Japanese regime in Manchuguo, where Japanese authorities championed them as examples of "East Asian religion" (Duara 2003). On an organizational level, redemptive societies were aggressive modernizers, taking advantage of changes in print technology (Clart and Scott 2015) and transportation to make their message widely available, especially in urban China.

As reinvented traditions, redemptive societies were a vital part of China's religious and cultural worlds in the interwar period, as illustrated by the relevant chapters of a recent volume

on religious leadership in modern China (Ownby, Goossaert, and Ji 2017). To the extent that they were political, however, they were on the wrong side of history; many redemptive society leaders had close ties to leading political figures of the Republican period, both during the Beiyang period and the Nanjing decade. Shortly after the Communist victory, the new regime launched a major campaign against the redemptive societies, which they called "reactionary sects and secret societies" (*fandong huidaomen* 反動會道門), as part of their initial efforts to establish order and eliminate potential rival organizations (Shao 1997). This campaign was successful, and, again, the Yiguandao is an exceptional example of a redemptive society still active in the twenty-first century, although some smaller groups also still exist in the Chinese communities of Southeast Asia. Further, China's *qigong* boom (Palmer 2007) in the 1980s and 1990s contained many features similar to the rise of redemptive societies in the interwar era, reminding us of their appeal to part of the Chinese population.

Although the redemptive societies of the interwar period are largely forgotten today, they remind us of the richness and relative openness of China's culture and society during this era, even among more conservative Chinese groups. The redemptive societies were not nearly as cosmopolitan as many of China's Christians, Buddhists (especially those associated with Taixu), or Communists, who were drawn into a worldwide movement with many moving parts in Asia and elsewhere, but neither were they ostriches with their heads stuck in the sand.

This article explores the vitality of the redemptive societies of the interwar period by focusing on Li Yujie 李玉階 (1900–1994), a lieutenant in Xiao Changming's 蕭昌明 (1893–1943) redemptive society—the Heavenly Virtues Teachings (Tiandejiao 天德教)—who became the leader of Xiao's society after Xiao's death in 1943, renaming it the Teachings of Heaven and Man (Tianrenjiao 天人教).[1] As a redemptive society leader, Li was unusual in that he had received a modern education, served as a student leader of the May Fourth movement in Shanghai, joined the Nationalist Party (Guomindang, or GMD), and eventually worked in the Nanjing government as a technocrat under T. V. Soong and H. H. Kong. He was also unusual became he made a conscious attempt to modernize the teachings he inherited from his master through the creation of a new scripture, *The Ultimate Realm* (Xinjingjie 新境界), in which science was meant to supplant White Lotus elements, or at least to recontextualize them. This scripture, the main focus of this article, was produced by a kind of spirit writing (a practice

widespread in the redemptive societies of the period) in which communication between Li and the gods of his tradition created a new message that appeared in the form of Chinese characters revealed on a piece of yellow cloth in the Heavenly Virtues temple. At first glance, it may look ironic, or even nonsensical, for "scientific messages" to be produced via spirit writing, but for Li, the point was to go beyond facile distinctions between science and superstition, modernity and tradition, and to arrive at a new synthesis that preserved China's traditions—such as spiritual healing—by providing new and scientific explanations of how they worked. Although *The Ultimate Realm* is not a particularly successful scripture—even some believers find the language and arguments obscure and esoteric—Li's efforts to transcend conventional dichotomies are worthy of note in that they illustrate the fluidity of cultural and intellectual boundaries during the period.

Li Yujie and Xiao Changming

Li Yujie (figure 1) was born in Suzhou in 1900 into what had once been an important family of scholar-officials, although Li's father, who died when Li was young, had decided to live his life as a "scholar-farmer," according to Li family legend. The authors of Li's biographies (Liu 2001; Tiandijiao 2005), who are members of the redemptive society he reestablished in Taiwan in 1979, have combed through records from his childhood to find evidence that his religious vocation was destined from the beginning. Be that as it may, Li's personal history also has a worldly aspect: after completing high school in Suzhou, he went to Shanghai for further education, and attended the thoroughly modern Chinese Public School (Zhongguo gongxue 中國公學) (Liu 1982). This school was well known for its connections with GMD intellectual and political leaders who would have been quite revolutionary during the latter part of the 1910s, when Li studied there. At the Chinese Public School, Li served as student leader during the Shanghai May Fourth movement in 1919 and joined the GMD later that same year. After graduating, Li worked in government finance—first in local government in the Shanghai area and later in the Nanjing government's Ministry of Finance, where he played a signal role in drafting the Nationalist government's first business tax code. He married in 1925 and had four sons in fairly rapid succession. In the 1920s and 1930s, he traveled frequently between Shanghai,

where his wife and children lived, and Nanjing, where his office was located. He appears to have been part of the rising technocratic bourgeois elite, and even enjoyed playing the stock market.



Figure 1. Portrait of Li Yujie, later in life. Used with permission of The Lord of Universe Church, Taipei, Taiwan.

Xiao Changming was born in rural Sichuan and became a redemptive society leader at a relatively young age. The only details we have about his early life are hagiographic: his biographers (Pan 2007; Lu 1973) present Xiao as a god sent from heaven by the Eternal Venerable Mother to save the world. As a young child, he decided that he would prefer to return to heaven and died. The Eternal Venerable Mother disagreed with his choice and "awakened" him in his casket on the way to the cemetery. Xiao eventually accepted his mission, leaving home at a young age and traveling around Sichuan and, later, Hunan, to heal people, meditate, and cultivate his powers. He was accompanied on some of his travels by a mythic figure, sent to Earth by Heavenly Virtues gods, who guided him in his practice and tested his resolve. By the 1920s, Xiao had founded his redemptive society and had had considerable success in southern and southeastern China, apparently because of his useful connections with officers in the GMD military. Some sources record that, by 1930, Xiao's society had one million members.

Xiao's redemptive society looks to be fairly typical. Xiao presented himself not as a god descended from heaven (at least not in his publicly available texts) but rather as a master of traditional Chinese wisdom and a talented spiritual healer. His healing powers were based on his mastery of traditional Chinese wisdom, which stressed a strong connection between mind and body. A properly cultivated mind would avoid excessive desires—one major origin of suffering and disease—and would be open to the Daoist cultivation techniques Xiao taught. In addition to Heavenly Virtue temples, Xiao also established institutions such as the Religion-Philosophy Research Society (Zongjiao zhexue yanjiushe 宗教哲學研究社), East Asian Institutes of Spiritual Healing (Dongfang jingshen zhiliaoyuan 東方精神治療院), and a charitable organization called the Red Heart Society (Hongxin zihui 紅心字會).

The central scripture for which Xiao was known is called *The Compass of Life* (Rensheng zhi nan 人生指南) (Xiao 1999). In this work, he offers three- to four-page glosses on the twenty ideographs he thought central to Chinese civilization and culture. One assumes that these developed out of sermons that Xiao had given over the years, but the text is written in a literary style that is surely meant to bolster his claims to erudition and mastery instead of his skills as a communicator. Like other redemptive society scriptures, *The Compass of Life* mentions Christianity, Islam, and modern science, but the focus is clearly on Chinese traditions. There is little or no claim to innovation or novelty in the text, which to modern, non-Chinese eyes gives it a rather sterile air. However, since Xiao's basic message was "We are suffering because we have strayed from the time-tested ways," innovation, novelty, or even charm may not be the point. Other texts circulated by Xiao's society emphasize his healing skills, sometimes attempting to reconcile Xiao's practices—based in Chinese medicine—with those of modern Western medicine (Xiao 1929, 1933).

We do not know why Li Yujie took Xiao Changming as his master. He had apparently experimented with *qigong* prior to meeting Xiao; his biography mentions that he had studied with Jiang Weiqiao 蔣維喬 (Kohn 2002), one of the inventors of modern *qigong*, apparently as a result of unknown health problems. In any event, he sought out Xiao Changming in Nanjing in 1930, on the recommendation of an acquaintance, and Xiao greeted him with a hearty "Yujie, you've come!" although they had never met. Impressed, Li took him as his master immediately, and seemingly overnight became a major lieutenant in Xiao's organization. Li's main

contribution in his first few years as a society member was to organize the opening of the Shanghai branch of the Heavenly Virtues Teachings in 1934.

Soon after the launching of Xiao's Shanghai branch, the master held a hundred-day retreat for his eighteen "true lords"—his chief lieutenants—hoping to capitalize on his Shanghai success and propel his movement forward in other parts of China where the society was less known. The transcripts of the lectures Xiao gave at this retreat, later printed and circulated as scriptures (Wang 1985), reveal a message considerably different from that conveyed by *The Compass of Life* or his writings on spiritual healing. Although healing and morality are indeed stressed in the talks, what stands out are the "White Lotus sectarian" elements: the Eternal Venerable Mother, the imminent end of the world, and the fact that Xiao himself was depicted as a god sent from heaven to save the world. One assumes that Xiao would have communicated such facts to his close followers before the retreat, but it bears repeating that such language does *not* appear in his other writings. One can only speculate as to why a well-educated technocrat like Li Yujie (or the other seventeen "true lords," most of whom shared a social and intellectual profile with Li) would be won over by a message that in the past—and, to some extent, the present—was associated with heterodoxy. After all, some groups in the GMD were very active in campaigns to suppress superstition (Nedostup 2009) (and Xiao's East Asian Institutes of Spiritual Healing would eventually be accused of just that in 1937). We can only assume that Xiao Changming possessed considerable personal charisma, and that his neo-conservative embrace of Chinese tradition resonated with the cultural nationalism of a certain part of the elite.

At the Shanghai retreat, Li was ordered to relocate to Xi'an, China's ancient capital, in order to spread the Tiandejiao to China's vast and impoverished northwest. Li presented his case to his boss, H. H. Kung, who, despite finding Li's motives somewhat preposterous (Kung was a Christian), managed to find him a GMD job in Xi'an. Arriving in 1935, Li immediately set to work on Tiandejiao initiatives with the enthusiastic assistance of local politicians such as Shaanxi governor Shao Lizi 邵力子. These initiatives included establishing Tiandejiao institutions as well as carrying out spiritual healing interventions to help opium addicts.

In the summer of 1937, on the eve of Japan's invasion of China, Li resigned from his government position, abandoned Xi'an, and, together with his wife and children, settled on Huashan (Goossaert 2008), the Daoist sacred mountain some 120 kilometers east of Xi'an. He

had been warned by a Heavenly Virtues god—the same mysterious figure who had accompanied Xiao Changming on his travels—that a crisis loomed and that Li's place was on Huashan. Li was to remain there for almost eight years, until the end of the war, although he came down from time to time for various reasons.

While on the mountain, Li devoted himself completely to spiritual pursuits for the first time in his life. He meditated and prayed, read and reflected, and consorted with other recluses and worthies who found themselves on the mountain. Part of Li's mission on Huashan was tactical: Li believed that his presence on the mountain and his daily contact with the gods served to block the Japanese military advance south of the Yellow River, thus shielding the Nationalist government, which had relocated to Sichuan after the Nanjing Massacre in December of 1937. Li also used information received in his communication with the gods to write geopolitical prophecies, which he shared with his many contacts in GMD military and civil circles (Hu Zongnan 胡宗南, one of Chiang Kai-shek's favorite generals, was a close friend of Li's). Another part of Li's mission was more purely religious; he was becoming a religious leader during this period. Because of his enthusiasm and his success in Xi'an, he was already the most important of Xiao Changming's "true lords." When Xiao Changming died in 1943, Li assumed leadership of the society (although some of Xiao's followers disputed Li's succession, and have continued to do so to the present day) and changed the name of the group to the Heaven and Man Teachings. It was in the context of his rise to religious leadership that Li sought to bring the religious tradition to which he belonged up to date by "scientizing" its basic message.

The Ultimate Realm

Already in late 1936, Li had discussed with other Heavenly Virtues cadres their shared concerns about the society's lack of a "central theory." They worried that Xiao's twenty characters and the promise of spiritual healing might not be enough to attract the well-educated elite (Liu 2001, 107–108). That said, I suspect that the central figure in the production of Li Yujie's *Ultimate Realm* was not Li himself but rather Huang Zhenxia 黃震遐 (1909–1974), one of Li's most important disciples, who spent many months with Li on Huashan. Huang seems to have been a true believer and at the same time very skeptical of Xiao Changming and everything that smacked of the White Lotus. He was also a quick study and a facile writer, which surely

accounts for the scientific language that pervades the text. The story of the rebranding of Xiao Changming's Tiandejiao thus begins with Huang Zhenxia.

Huang was born in Beijing in 1909 into a well-educated, well-to-do family (Sha 1979). His father, Huang Xiaoxue 黃效學, had graduated from a translation college in Beijing; was fluent in English, Japanese, and French; and also possessed a solid foundation in Chinese classical studies. Originally from Guangdong, Huang Xiaoxue had been active in the Hundred Days Reforms of 1898 as a disciple of Kang Youwei 康有為 and was a close acquaintance of Liang Qichao 梁啟超. Huang Xiaoxue died in 1918, when he was in his early thirties and his son was nine years old. Huang's mother, née Tang 湯, was from a well-known scholarly family in Xiaoshan, Zhejiang, and had been a close friend of the martyr Qiu Jin 秋瑾. Like her husband, she spoke both English and French.

Following Huang Xiaoxue's untimely death, mother and son moved to Hong Kong, and Zhenxia enrolled in St. Paul's College. While in Hong Kong, Huang's mother defied traditional Chinese expectations of widows and frequented cafés and restaurants, often together with her son and non-Chinese friends. Huang later remembered this period as the happiest and freest of his life, and it was at this point that he developed his lifelong love of Western culture. Unfortunately, his mother lost her money with the collapse of a French bank (Bonin n.d.), and, despite appeals from her husband's family to return to the ancestral home in Guangdong, decided instead to move to Shanghai. She died in 1926, when Zhenxia was only seventeen, as a result of appendicitis and peritonitis.

Huang Zhenxia had already left school at the age of sixteen to work as a graphic designer and clerk. He continued to educate himself in his spare time, spending many hours at the Zhabei Dongfang Library, and eventually turned to journalism and creative writing in the 1920s and 1930s. In 1930, he published an epic poem, "The Blood of the Yellow People" (Huangren zhi xue 黃人之血) in *Vanguard Monthly* (Xianfeng yuekan 先鋒月刊), a short-lived journal devoted to "nationalist literature" (Wong 2008). In 1932, he published *The Destruction of Greater Shanghai* (Da Shanghai de huimie 大上海的毀滅), a novel that describes the effects of the Shanghai Incident of early 1932 on young urbanites. Beginning in the early 1930s, he worked for the Shanghai newspaper *Dawanbao* (大晚報) and became known for his war reporting. Jiang

Jianren 蔣堅忍, a GMD military officer, noticed Huang's work during the Shanghai Incident and, after becoming head of political education at the GMD Air Force Academy, invited Huang to Hangzhou in 1934 to edit the *Air Force Weekly* (Hangkong zhoukan 空軍週刊). With the onset of the Sino-Japanese War, Huang followed Jiang Jianren to Wuhan, and subsequently to Xi'an, where Jiang worked under General Hu Zongnan. Huang eventually held a number of literary and military positions in the region, including editor of the Northwest New China Publishing Company and the *Xinjiang Daily* newspaper. After the war he moved to Hong Kong and became a well-known journalist (writing under the pen name Dong Fanghe 東方赫) specializing in Chinese Communist military affairs (Whitson 1973).

Li and Huang met in Xi'an (or perhaps on Huashan) through their overlapping networks[2] and developed an easy intimacy. Huang took Li as his master, and in the winter of 1940–1941 they settled in for three months of intense work, during which time most of Li's new scripture, *The Ultimate Realm*, was composed.

Huang's views on the redemptive society he had joined are revealed in a letter he wrote to Li after Xiao Changming's death but before the publication of *The Ultimate Realm* in 1944. The letter is surely part of a longer conversation Li and Huang had been engaged in concerning the "renewal" of Xiao's teachings, in which Huang was very frank about his great fear that Li Yujie was propagating White Lotus teachings:

> In my view, our teachings have been, in the past, those of Master Xiao's system, a system which, in terms of content and style, has retained the form of the White Lotus. Such teachings would only be suitable for people whose educational levels are backward, and we would not be able to propagate them among the elite of society. Even if it worked in the early Republican period, it will no longer work now. My Master has always been an intellectual and has dedicated himself to national affairs. It is only because of the constraints of master-disciple ties and the limitations of the tradition [inherited from Xiao] that Master Li has not carried out a thoroughgoing reform and renewal of the teachings.… Master Xiao has now died, which provides us an occasion to renew the teaching. If we do not painstakingly carry out a thorough renewal, our future is bleak. If the feudal remnants of the faith are not eliminated, then the style of a new religion will not be established.… Even if my personal beliefs are strong and will not waver, people in society share with me the desire to have nothing to do with the White Lotus. (Quoted in Liu 2001, 145–148)

Huang is unsparing in his criticism, noting elsewhere in the same letter that Li's achievements have been "limited to [recruiting] a few military people and politicians, who have engaged in limited philanthropy but whose beliefs are muddled." In language that reflects his long association with the GMD, he counsels Li to use "revolutionary means" to purge the ranks of his followers of such people, replacing them with more "democratic" believers. At the same time, he argues for a society that will be composed of a small number of well-educated elites. Future members should "be college-educated, have great understanding of philosophy and must be recognized inside China and out" (quoted in Liu 2001, 145–148).

Huang further argues that the "mysterious" aspects of Li's religion inherited from the White Lotus should be purged and replaced by the relative ritual simplicity found in Christianity and Islam. In what can only be seen as a radical departure from the Chinese religious tradition, he argued that "the whole notion of religious tradition should be gotten rid of. It is hard enough for people today to respect [living] individuals; how can we expect them to respect dead people?" Nor was he favorably disposed to the institutional structures of the Tiandejiao; he wanted to scrap both the charitable organization and the spiritual healing clinics.

Huang's criticisms are surprising only because he is an avowed follower of Li Yujie. Otherwise, they echo those of other critics of redemptive societies both within and outside of the GMD. At the same time, the letter also reveals what Huang feels are the positive points of the religion: the gods with whom Huang and Li were in daily contact. He notes elsewhere in his letter that, "if our highest gods are solely from the Daoist tradition, we will be unable to achieve our goals and convince the masses. This is crucial—the kind of enlightenment we preach will determine whether we are like the White Lotus (broadly speaking) or a new religion." He also praises spirit writing for facilitating discussion of the meaning of the Way with the various gods. It bears recalling that many Chinese viewed spirit writing and similar techniques as "scientific," as had Westerners before them. He adds that, in addition to putting scientifically educated people in charge of the faith, Li should also "establish relations with American and British spiritualists, using the international influence to fend off criticism that we are spreading superstition."[3]

In sum, Huang's letter illustrates that modern, well-educated Chinese could be drawn to basic teachings of Chinese salvational religion in spite of their general embrace of secularism. At the same time, the letter suggests that they were uncomfortable with much of the language and symbols surrounding these teachings. Even if Huang's letter was drafted after the writing of *The*

Ultimate Realm, it is surely revealing of conversations Li and Huang had during the writing process. Clearly, Li and Huang were searching for a new way to present the key ideas that had drawn Li to Xiao and Huang to Li. In writing (or transcribing) the volume, they did *not* opt for the frank criticism of the White Lotus found in Huang's letter, chosing instead to base their new scripture on science.

The resulting volume, *The Ultimate Realm*, is radically different—at least in form and language—from anything that Xiao Changming or other redemptive society leaders of the period penned, although the core of Xiao's teachings remains at some level unchanged.[4] In the preface, Li begins by evoking the coming apocalypse, noting that "this world plunges into turmoil unlike anything seen before, and humanity suffers through the throes of imminent calamity [a reference to World War II]… [resulting in] insanity, desperation, distress, misery, fear and weariness" (Li 1994, 1). Religion, Li asserts, has always been a response to such events, and has evolved to meet the needs of the time:

> Buddhism arose to counter the rigid castes of Brahmanism and taught equality and the possession of Buddha-nature by all beings.… Martin Luther founded Protestantism to resist oppression by the Pope… [,] fostering the liberation of European thought and ushering in Western civilization as we have known it for four hundred years. (1994, 1–2)

According to Li, religion must now transcend the "received notion" of the "mind-matter distinction" and acknowledge that "the distance between Heaven and man lessens as the wheel of time advances" (1994, 2–3). This claim is linked to Li's notion of the historical evolution of religion, according to which primitive man saw the deities as possessing awesome power, traditional man viewed God as a savior who rewarded service with salvation, and modern man has come to understand through science that "divine power ultimately is no more than a mediation between matter and Nature" (Li 1994, 91–92).

The goal of the text is to explore "the principles of compatibility between science and philosophy" (Li 1994, 3). Following these teachings, the cultivated man will "contact and bond with the non-physical spirit realm, exchanging culture between Heaven and man" (Li 1994, 4). Such "bonding" is not new, having been practiced in China by Confucians, Buddhists, and Daoists across the centuries. *The Ultimate Realm* aims to provide an additional explanation for the function of such bonding, a scientific explanation that will complement rather than supplant ancient wisdom.

Part 2 of *The Ultimate Realm* is entitled "A Natural View of Matter" and consists of three chapters: "Substance of the Cosmos," "The Origin of the Universe," and "Formation of Celestial Bodies." These chapters establish the material, scientific basis for the larger religious and philosophical synthesis Li and Huang were striving for, and the authors return to the basic concepts and arguments therein in part 3 of the volume. The concepts and arguments developed in part 2 are also meant to complement traditional Chinese cosmological explanations of the origin of the universe by providing scientific explanations that do not discredit Chinese traditions, but rather affirm them through integration into a modernized, comprehensive whole.

More precisely, Li begins by identifying the two basic substances that make up the universe: electropons (or e-tropons, for short) (*dianzi* 電子) and harmonons (*hezi* 和子).[5] E-tropons are the basic components of matter in the universe, but they contain no life force: "E-tropons combine to form atoms, atoms form molecules, molecules form materials" (Li 1994, 12–13). E-tropons are further divided into *yin* e-tropons, which are "coarse, heavy, and high in density" and *yang* e-tropons, which are "fine, light, and low in density." Li does not explain why concepts like *yin* and *yang* remain necessary to the function of e-tropons and harmonons, but notes simply that rocks are made up chiefly of *yin* e-tropons, and human beings (the most evolved living creatures) are made up chiefly of *yang* e-tropons (1994, 14). "If the universe had only e-tropons with no harmonons, it would manifest the most rudimentary phenomena of nature (only light, gases, and water). Animals, plants and minerals could not come into existence" (Li 1994, 15).

Harmonons are the vital, spiritual component of nature, "the prime constituents of all phenomena… which are *yang*, active, self-determining or self-aware" (Li 1994, 15). At the most basic level, harmonons combine with e-tropons to create the beings that inhabit the universe, be it humans (the result of the combination of harmonons with high-quantity *yang* e-tropons) or minerals (the result of the combination of harmonons with low-quantity *yang* e-tropons) (Li 1994, 17). The rest of Li's discussion of harmonons is more difficult to follow. He argues that harmonons are made up of hydrogenic essences, oxygenic essences, e-tropic substances, heat, and a special factor X, which "represents spiritual consciousness of a certain kind" (1994, 15).

Although references to "hydrogenic" and "oxygenic" essences suggest a relationship to basic chemistry and a desire to present harmonons in scientific terms, Li subsequently defines

hydrogen as having to do with "functions of touch and smell" and oxygen with "functions of taste and discrimination" (1994, 16). The e-tropic substance is also linked to "senses of hearing and sight" and the "special factor X" to "functions of intention and will" (and all four substances are further defined in Buddhist terms, either as *gunas* or *manas*). Humans come into being through the "union of harmonons (spirit) and e-tropons (matter) formed by the father's sperm and the mother's ovum." At the same time, harmonons "spirally descend" through a spot on the top of the human head, providing the functions of perception and consciousness. The decrease in e-tropic substance over time explains the fact that people's sense of sight and hearing diminish with age. At death, harmonons abandon the body and are released into the universe, where they will bond again to form other life-forms.

Beyond their applications in human biology, harmonons and e-tropons are also the origin of all "natural forces." Since the two basic components work in harmony to give rise to the universe, this dynamic state is called a "harmonizing force," and "when such a harmonizing force expands into an immense spiral force, it becomes [a] spiral harmonizing force, which is fundamental in forming celestial objects in the cosmos" (Li 1994, 17–18). In other words, the union of e-tropons and harmonons explains the formation and movement of celestial bodies, as well as the principles of physics and human biology. Li concludes the first chapter of part 2 of *The Ultimate Realm* by noting that "everything in the universe is in a dynamic state. At the large end is the spiral harmonizing force which forms the universe's celestial bodies; in the middle is the force of e-tropons and harmonons acting on each other, as in the human body; and at the small end is the ceaseless movement of e-tropons found even within a cup of water" (Li 1994, 18–19).

In the remaining sections of part 2, Li Yujie explains the origin of the universe and the formation of celestial bodies (stars, planets, Earth). Part 3, "A Human View of Spirit," discusses the origin of life, the nature of human life, the realm of the spirit, the relationship of bonding and harmonizing forces, the powers of spiritual entities, and the equality of the sacred and the worldly, among other things. In these sections, Li broadens his discussion of e-tropons and harmonons and the harmonizing forces that bind them to attempt a unified field theory explaining the origins of the cosmos, the nature of human life, and the relations between god and man. The language is relentlessly scientific. In the introduction to part 3, Li describes the argument in part 2 as "mainly an explanation of a new sort of natural science." Part 3, in the author's words, is "an

effort to expound cosmic truth from a scientific perspective… to establish a new sort of spiritual science, to illumine the true Tao of the cosmos" (Li 1994, 39).

Unfortunately, if Li's intentions are clear, his theories and arguments are difficult to follow. My impression is that Li and Huang made a good-faith effort to digest recent advances in the natural sciences (particularly physics) and apply this knowledge to spiritual cultivation. It is not immediately clear if the opaqueness of *The Ultimate Realm* is due to the fanciful or incomplete understanding of scientific concepts by Li and Huang, to translation problems,[6] or to the limits of my own scientific knowledge. In any event, the following will provide a brief sample of Li's arguments.

In his discussion of the formation of spiral harmony systems, we find analyses of the "primordial phenomenon of chaos," the "evolution… in e-tropicity and cosmic ch'i [*qi*]," the "coalescence of the rhomboid cosmic ch'i [*qi*]," the "origination of the spiral harmonizing force," the "workings of the law of spiral harmony," and the "dynamics of primordial nebulae." Drawings in this section include: "locus of centripetal movement in a spiral harmony system," "rising rhomboid bodies of cosmic ch'i [*qi*] encounter vortical wind, then descend in a spiral," "formation of spiral harmony system," and "types of movement in the law of spiral harmony." This section concludes as follows:

> Thus celestial bodies of this area evolve from chaos into a new spiral harmony system. After its formation the new system depends on a supply of hydro-electropic force from above, below and all sides (all "below" in the broad sense), to maintain its workings as a spiral harmony system. The supply from above and below maintains its position and that from all sides insures its revolution. If the *aqua essentia* in the system is ever exhausted, the celestial bodies of this area will go back to chaos, its landforms will disintegrate into e-tropic ch'i [*qi*] and diffuse through space. (Li 1994, 27)

In a discussion of the creation of life on Earth, we find the following passage:

> In minerals, assume that there is one harmonon for each 4.32 square inches of area. The attraction will be as follows: a. The uppermost portion of minerals can absorb harmonons within one cubic meter; the middle layer can absorb harmonons within a volume of 10.38 cubic inches; the lowest layer can absorb harmonons within a volume of 2.07 cubic inches. b. For any harmonons absorbed into an organism, except in mankind, the direction will be downward. In plants, whenever a seed is sprouting (i.e., its e-tropons are in a ferment), then its atoms will absorb a harmonon. Attraction is possible for any harmonon within a volume of one thousand cubic feet. (Li 1994, 48)

In a subsequent discussion of self-nature and physical desire (subjects often encountered in the writings of Xiao Changming, among other religious specialists), we learn that:

> The crux of self-nature and physical desire: All charged bodies exert a force that attracts others with incomparable speed. The push and pull of feelings and physical desire are a response to attraction by e-tropicity. In the human body there is a distinction between yin and yang e-tropicity. When such e-tropicity is emitted, it becomes an initiator of thoughts and a manifestation of character.... When Christianity takes love as an expression of the highest state of feeling, it is based on this. As for Buddhism, it takes nothing other than yang e-tropicity as its "right mindfulness."… Emanations of yang e-tropicity are straight, intuitive, and thus most likely to get a direct response. Emanations of yin e-tropicity are indirect and curved. When a human being has evil thoughts, a great degree of vacillation, hesitation, or violent mental disturbance will certainly occur. At this time the e-tropic substance in his harmonons will undergo an electrochemical change; the yang e-tropic substance will transform into a yin e-tropon. The emanation from this yin e-tropon will become determination that stems from this evil thought, and action will follow. (Li 1994, 56–58)

Such examples could be multiplied many times over.

Above and beyond the scientific language and arguments that make up most of *The Ultimate Realm*, however, the text still conveys the basic messages that presumably made Xiao Changming's teachings appealing to his followers. First, spiritual healing is affirmed, if accorded less space than in Xiao Changming's writings (see figure 2). This healing is explained as a result of the mutual attraction between "pleading emanations of *yin* e-tropicity" (i.e., the suffering patient who sincerely desires to be healed) and the "compassionate emanations of *yang* e-tropicity" (i.e., the sincere desire of the healer to help the patient). The bonding and harmonizing forces emanating from these two people produce a "critical energy" that calls force god's primordial *qi* and the patient is cured (Li 1994, 80, see figure 3). But bonding and harmonizing forces, and indeed the whole notion of communication between man and heaven, are discussed at much greater length than spiritual healing, which is presented as part of this larger subject. Such "sympathetic forces" exist between human beings, humans and harmonons, and humans and deities. For the practitioner desiring to develop his capacity to make use of such forces, the "key is that both patient and healer need to put forth the utmost sincerity" (Li 1994, 79), which is defined in a thoroughly conservative fashion:

Methods for humans to nurture the bonding and harmonizing forces between themselves and higher beings fall into three types: 1. Do deeds of merit and virtue in this world and become a freed spirit after death; 2. Increase one's bonding force to attract harmonizing force from the deity or Buddha that one wishes to approach… 3. Temper the spirit and seek to arrive at a new natural environment after passing away. (Li 1994, 75)

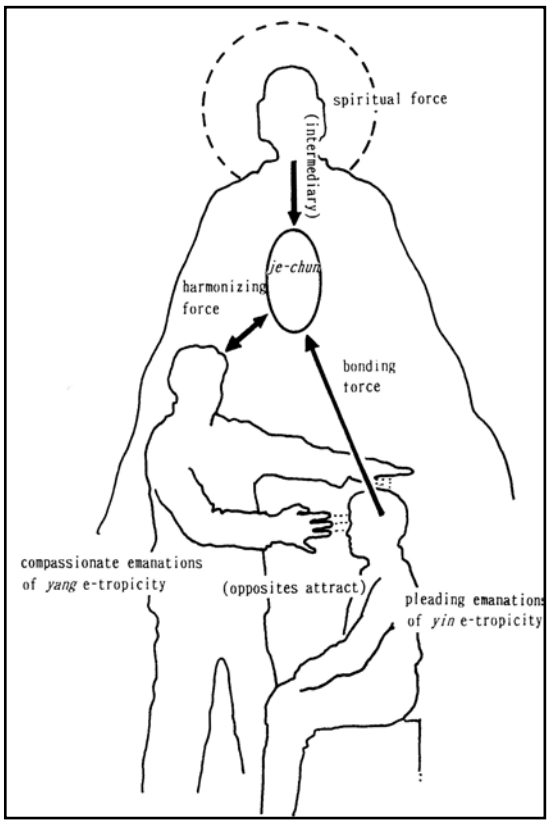


Figure 2. "Spiritual Healing."
Source: Li (1994, 80).

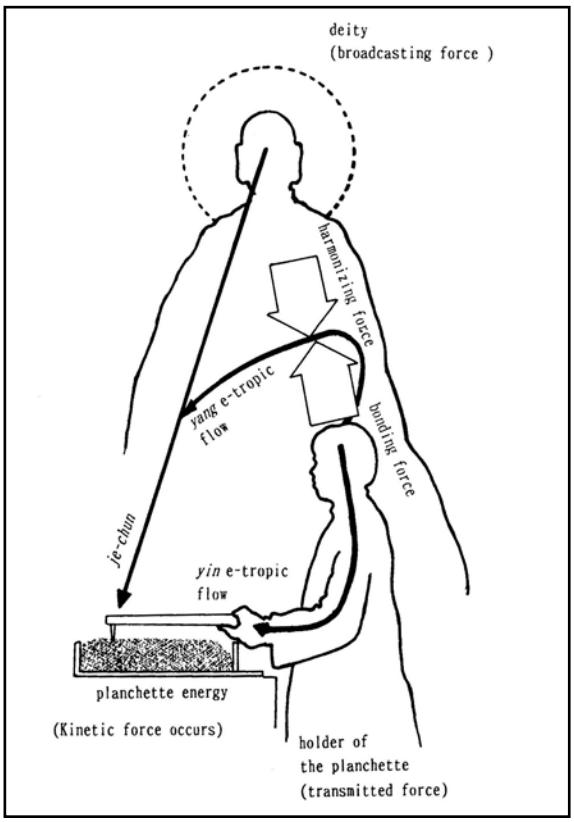


Figure 3. "Mediumship of the Planchette."
Source: Li (1994, 77).

Harmonizing and bonding forces are also used to explain the mediumship of the planchette, the mediumship of light (i.e., the projection of characters on the yellow cloth practiced by Li Yujie) (figure 4), and the mediumship of the pen, as well as auditory mediumship. In other words, *The Ultimate Realm* seeks to provide a scientific explanation of spirit writing and other related practices:

Mediumship of the planchette is receiving a broadcast from the spirit realm to the human world. The spirit-medium is the transmittal force, the planchette localizes

the e-tropic force, and the deity serves as the broadcasting force. The transmitted (bonding) force reaches out to the broadcasted (harmonizing) force above. The two stimulate each other, initiating e-tropic kinesis in the planchette. (Li 1994, 76)

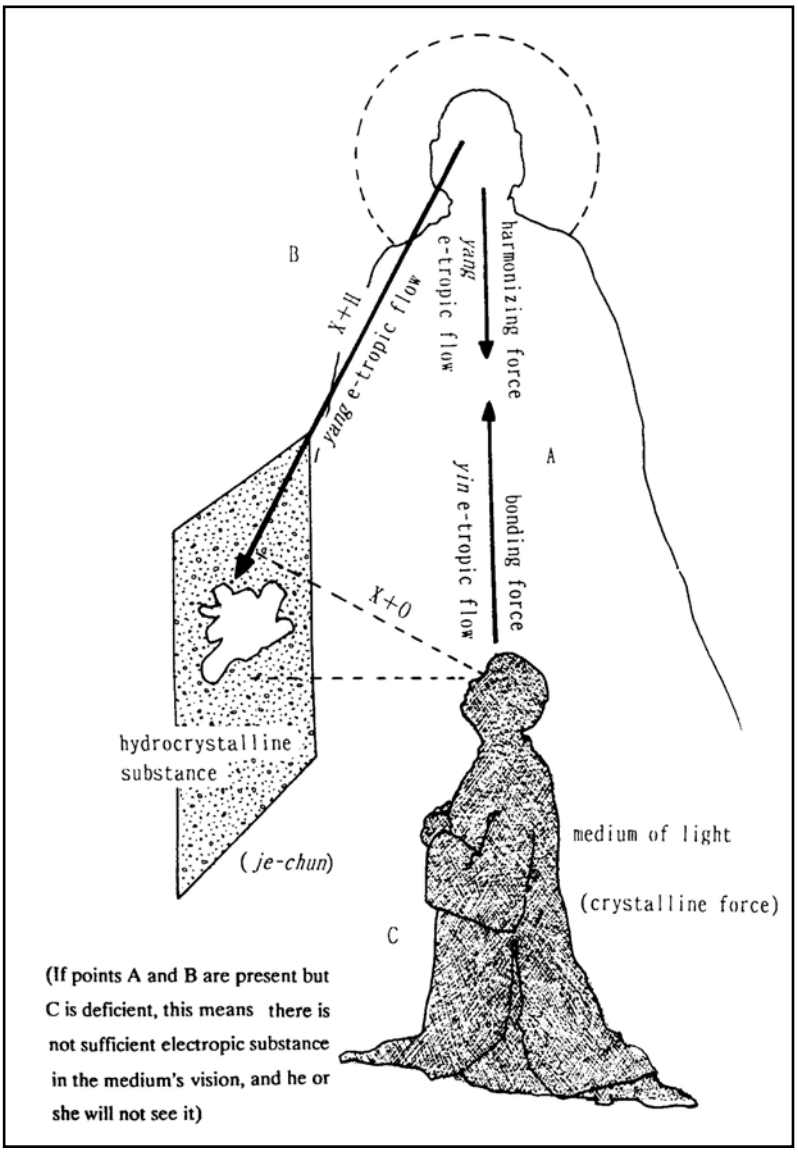


Figure 4. "Mediumship of Light." *Source*: Li (1994, 78).

At the same time, Li argues that the spirit medium should be a virgin child, should possess "personal qualities of devotion and constancy," and should have "a certain degree of intelligence." The scientific functions of virginity, devotion, constancy, and intelligence are not

identified (children's harmonons, by contrast, are noted to contain relatively strong e-tropic substances), and the idea that spirit mediums should be young, virginal, and morally upright was widely shared in traditional Chinese religion. As *The Ultimate Realm* moves away from the origin and physical function of the universe and toward areas that touch practitioners' lives more directly, there is more discussion of familiar spiritual and religious tropes and less discussion of science, although it rarely disappears completely.

Quiet contemplation (common to both Xiao Changming's and Li Yujie's teachings and practices) is described as "sitting meditation, as in Ch'an, carried to the highest level. It proceeds through settling, quietude, tranquility, and reflection to the true realm of attainment. This is what Taoists call 'penetrating the spirit' and Buddhists call 'seeing one's own nature'" (Li 1994, 79). Success in quiet sitting requires curbing physical desires and purifying the heart. Subsequently, one learns to circulate one's *qi*: "an ultra-*yang* heat flow produced after high-level e-tropic substance from harmonon blends with bodies of static e-tropicity.… This practice is what Taoist scriptures call seizing the dragon and taming the tiger, or drawing out the lead and blending in the mercury" (Li 1994, 85–86). The subsequent discussion of Daoist *neidan* practices includes scientific explanations, but Daoist discourse generally takes pride of place.[7] Li concludes this discussion by advocating the "dual cultivation of self-nature and the body" (*xingming shuangxiu* 性命雙修), the lived practice of the unity of matter and spirit that leads to human–divine communication and eventually convergence (1994, 89). Throughout the latter half of *The Ultimate Realm*, there are many references to Buddhist and Daoist terms and deities (alongside occasional references to Christian and Muslim practices), as well as to gods and practices drawn from popular religion. Thus, even if Li's text does not mimic the familiar cadences of Xiao's writings, there are still comfortable references to Chinese tradition, its relevance, utility, and power.

A final point of commonality between *The Ultimate Realm* and the teachings of Xiao Changming is a shared positive emphasis on striving. Both thoroughly reject what they see as the passive resignation associated with faiths that preach "non-action" (*wuwei* 無為) and argue for positive engagement with the world. In the final chapter of part 3 of *The Ultimate Realm*— "The Way of Striving"— Li insists that practitioners "strive toward heaven, strive with nature, and strive within oneself." Those who strive toward heaven "must harbor great enduring will and

boundless vows to pursue eternal life. Only this is sufficient to escape the travail of reincarnation, to extricate oneself from the predicament of sin and hasten the manifesting of cosmic truth for later ages—only an upstanding person does this!" (Li 1994, 96). As for nature, it is "mankind's common enemy. It must be overcome and reined in, before it will let our human civilization be remade as something higher" (1994, 96–97). To strive with heaven and nature, "one must first strive within himself to lay the foundation. This is what Confucians call cultivating sagehood by rectifying the mind and making the will sincere." The endpoint of striving will be equality with sacred beings.

Conclusion

"Border-crossing" books that seek to straddle the realms of science and religion are by now quite common, but Li Yujie and Huang Zhenxia believed that they had engaged in pioneering, revolutionary work. Li—who had no training in science—remained convinced throughout his life that *The Ultimate Realm* was a breakthrough text and was thrilled when it was translated into Japanese and English. If, instead of comparing it with Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics*, the Dalai Lama's *The Universe in a Single Atom*, or Li Hongzhi's *Zhuanfalun*, we imagine the excitement of the production of the text—the setting on the sacred site of Huashan, the communication with the gods, the Chinese characters appearing on the yellow cloth, and the challenge of the Anti-Japanese War—it is not hard to share the authors' sense of wonder. Quantum physics had joined with White Lotus teachings to produce a new vision that seemed to move humanity forward. If the text seems less persuasive now, it still stands as testimony to the openness and fluidity of Chinese culture and religion in the interwar period.

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Notes

1 For Chinese biographies, see Liu (2001) and Tiandijiao (2005); for English, see Ownby (2017), Palmer (2012), and Lee (2012). On Xiao, see Welch and Yü (1980).

2 One Tiandijiao member told me that Huang had been experimenting with spirit writing and had been possessed by a spirit. He initially sought Li out for help in ridding himself of the spirit.

3 Huang Kewu's fascinating research (2012) sheds light on the shifting boundaries between science, religion, and superstition during the Republican period, when spiritualism was seen as linking science and religion while hypnotism was spurned as a parlor trick.

4 The original edition of the text is Li (1944). Subsequent editions appeared in 1961, 1982, 1985, and 1997. The English-language translation is Li (1994), but it is not clear which edition served as its basis. A comparison of the 1944 and 1985 editions reveals minimal changes to the text. All references to the text in this article are to the English-language translation.

5 *Dianzi* is the accepted translation for "electron." The term *hezi* does not, to my knowledge, exist outside of Li Yujie's writings.

6 Denis Mair seems to have done a masterful job translating this difficult text, but I have not yet examined the Chinese-language physics texts Li and/or Huang must have read during their time living on Huashan. Perhaps the strangeness of their language originates in the efforts of others to present the abstractions of relativity theory and quantum mechanics in Chinese.

7 An exception is Li's discussion of a "raydon embryo," which Li notes is his addition to these teachings: "A raydon embryo is a concentration of the universe's great motive force and energy. It is attained by further cultivation of a sacred embryo. In any instance where radiation of e-tropic force reaches an extremely high energy level, the e-tropons will undergo intense excitation and become radioactive. This is what is called a thermonuclear reaction, and what Taoist alchemy calls 'fostering by warmth'" (Li 1994, 88).

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