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## Divine Lord Wenchang Meets Great King Tran: Spirit Writing in Late-Imperial/Colonial Vietnam

This paper looks at a practice which scholars refer to as “spirit writing” (giang but). Spirit writing is a phenomenon with a long history, but which particularly flourished in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries in China and Vietnam. It was a practice located on the border between what the ruling elite in these two lands considered orthodox and heterodox. It was heterodox in the sense that it required an individual to become possessed by a spirit and write out messages from that deity, a practice frowned upon by the elite. However, it was also orthodox in that many of the participants in spirit writing were members of the elite, and the messages that spirits relayed to them consisted largely of admonitions to uphold (Confucian) morality.

Spirit writing emerged first in China, and then spread to Vietnam in the early nineteenth century. It appears to have been practiced on a limited scale throughout most of the nineteenth century, but then began to spread as literati across the northern and central regions of Vietnam began to form spirit writing groups. The spread of spirit writing thus occurred right as the French were establishing their control over those regions, and can therefore be viewed as a means to deal a changing world. Not coincidentally, spirit writing also started to flourish around this same time in Taiwan, as that island came under Japanese colonial rule, a process which is well documented. Further, in both of these areas, this practice would continue to flourish well into the twentieth century.

Just as spirit writing blurred the division between the orthodox and heterodox, it also traversed the boundary between what we might label for convenience sake as “traditional” and “modern nationalist” worldviews. In keeping with traditional ways, spirit writings encouraged people to turn inward and cultivate their morality as a means to deal with a changing world. However, spirit writing also appears to have contributed to more nationalist perceptions in that as it came to flourish in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, Vietnamese spirits, Tran Hung Dao and Lieu Hanh in particular, began to speak through mediums, whereas earlier the spirits had all been Chinese, such as Wenchang dijun. To be fair, these spirits were usually presented as assisting Wenchang dijun, but their prominence may well have served to promote their name-recognition and a sense of importance for the participants in these spirit writing sessions.

I would argue that this topic fits the larger themes and concerns of the workshop quite well. First, it questions ideas that we have about the state

in the late nineteenth century. A common view that we have of nineteenth-century Vietnam, a view which works like Alexander Woodside's Vietnam and the Chinese Model to some extent helps promote, is that the Nguyen Dynasty was highly Sinicized/Confucian and that this somehow hindered their ability to deal with the French. What the practice of spirit writing suggests is that the kinds of ideas that we would expect of a Nguyen Dynasty emperor holed up in his palace were also being revealed in spirit writing sessions in local temples where individuals beyond the elite may well have been present and listening (indeed, one of the main admonitions that spirits passed on was for their messages to be propagated to all). Hence, whereas scholars like Woodside have argued for a mental divide between the ruling elite and those that they ruled over, spirit writing blurs this distinction.

Spirit writing also blurs the distinction between "traditional" and "nationalist" perceptions. While it would be tempting to view spirit writing as the "last gasp" of traditional Vietnam, one can sense sentiments and outlooks of a slightly more nationalist nature enter these works in the twentieth century. In particular, literati who read works by Chinese reformers such as Liang Qichao and Kang Youwei then engaged in spirit writing and propagated some of their ideas as well. As such, these works clearly question the binary of nationalist and traditionalist notions that this workshop wishes to address.