

Book Review

Alvin Eng Hui Lim, *Digital Spirits in Religion and Media*

Possession and Performance

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Religious traditions are deeply affected by the digital revolution. Particularly since the emergence of the internet, but even before that, religious actors and movements have been aware of new possibilities that are both an opportunity and a threat. Their approaches differ greatly: while many traditional religions were rather hesitant to jump on the digital bandwagon, other religions, particularly smaller and newer ones, were often at the forefront in adopting new technologies. Something of an east-west divide existed in this regard: examples show that religious traditions in various Asian countries were often more innovative than those in the West, be it in order to promote their content more intensively, or as a result of an earlier acquaintance with the digital world.

This study by Alvin Eng Hui Lim, which is based on his doctoral thesis, provides four case studies within the multifaceted religious landscape of Singapore, one of Asia's most multicultural and, consequently, multireligious cities, where different religious traditions meet. The monograph develops its own approach to examining these new developments and their impact. It is more than just a book on "digital spirits" (in contrast to non-digital ones), as the title might suggest, for it provides a fresh new theoretical model for how we might address such phenomena. The author's doctoral thesis was written in Theatre Studies, which automatically brings a specific perspective. Above all, we find an overall focus on the performative

aspect of the spiritual practices that are carefully described in the chapters and on the crucial merging of “being spiritual” and “being digital”. To a certain extent, Lim looks to supplement, even overcome, well-trodden paths when it comes to such research into the relationship between religion and digitization: where the transformative possibilities of the new media and/or the reception of new media technologies have often been a focus, Lim’s approach to the relationship between spirituality and mediality is based on what he terms “performative practices”.

An important reference point throughout the book is Bruno Latour’s interpretative take on religion that focuses on agencies that “make people do things” and includes all kinds of divinities, spirits and voices. The specificity of religious acts is thus upheld and protected. Frequent reference is also made to Jacques Derrida, “whose spirit haunts this book” (p. 7), although the author sometimes struggles to apply that theoretical model for his rather practically orientated descriptions. A number of other, mostly French, philosophers, intellectuals and media-theoreticians make more frequent appearances throughout the book, such as Georges Bataille, Paul Ricœur or Jean Baudrillard (which suggests a very Francophile approach to its subject).

The four case studies are taken from differing religious contexts (and Singapore provided a large range from which to choose), most of them with a Daoist background, though. The first major example, covered in chapters 2 and 3, provides insight into specific East Asian traditions of spiritual mediumship by introducing a spirit medium of the Daoist Monkey God, who works together with an assistant. Lim had full access to the relevant material, which included recorded sessions, and portrays the work of the medium for a local Daoist community. Insight into contemporary Daoist practices from a largely insider perspective is provided by the spirit medium’s highly individual consultations. This reviewer was not convinced that the author’s case required, however, the great detail of this meticulous description.

The next case study, presented in chapter 4, deals with changes to the Nine Emperor Gods Festival (*Jiu huangye dan*), an important religious festival with Daoist roots that is mostly celebrated by Chinese communities in South-East Asia around the end of September or the beginning of October (corresponding to the first nine days of the ninth month in the Chinese moon calendar system). The event is also known as the Vegetarian Festival, particularly in Thailand, where it became a tourist sensation in the last decades as a result of the colorful processions through the streets and special (vegetarian) food offered on this occasion. Lim focusses on the transforma-

tions caused by recent technological changes and the growing importance of advertising across all media channels, but he looks also at changes in the ritual practice itself: The spirit mediums and other actors who play a crucial role in the whole festival adapted their behavior in light of the presence of cameras and other filming devices, which is in line with the main thesis of the book, concerning the influence of new technologies on the performative aspects of rituals.

An uncommon case is presented in chapter 5, which addresses a distressing instance of attempted group suicide via internet mobilization that caused a media uproar in Singapore and beyond. In August 2008, the then 16-year-old Ku Witaya, who proclaimed himself a Daoist medium, convinced his younger brother and a group of six boys that they had to commit suicide to become “slayers” bound for the upcoming World War III. Eventually, two of the group executed the plan, namely Ku Witaya and his brother, while the others decided not to follow their example. This event is particularly revealing for the connection to the Daoist spirit mediumship tradition which forms a background to the events. In his study, Lim reimagines the digital world that was created by the actors: it was a merger of religious beliefs, on-line game imagination (with its many cross-references to religious terminology and/or practices) and other aspects of a virtual worldview that created a closed and claustrophobic space. Lim uses the extreme example explored in this chapter to develop his concept of a merger between religious traditions, namely spirit mediumship, and the digital world (here with the inclusion of the overlapping gaming world), setting in parallel respective concepts such as “becoming a medium” in the traditional religious sense of the word and “becoming an avatar”, that is “creating an avatar”, in the cyberworld. In addition to the authors Lim refers to, who include Richard Page, Jesper Juul, Patricia Lange, Jean Baudrillard and, naturally, Jacques Derrida, his approach would have benefitted from a closer look at material that has been published around the Heaven’s Gate mass suicide in 1997, a movement that also had a strong interest in the (emergent) Internet and new means of propagating content. The mechanisms in the group, the manipulative actions of the leader and the dire consequences of some of his assumptions might have shed additional light on the tragic events around Ku Witaya.

All the case studies presented so far have referred to the far-ranging and multifaceted Daoist tradition, specifically in terms of its concretization in various lived religious contexts. It is only in the final case study that another religion comes into focus, namely Christianity. This chapter exam-

ines Christian evangelistic media programs (for the Christian community in Singapore) and their use of performative techniques. Interestingly, the author himself is a member of a Christian denomination, and, indeed, he describes his own involvement in the establishment of an additional digital offering within one church (as director, in effect, for a Christmas show). That personal affinity may be significant for his concern with providers of evangelical Christianity who are rivals when it comes to the recruitment of new followers. The author does adopt a critical position when he points to modes of interaction generated by new media, and he also makes clear that the use of digital media might have unexpected consequences: reaching a wider audience comes with greater vulnerability, for a stronger media presence can provoke harsher criticism. In this regard, the position of the author opens up new perspectives, which might also have benefitted the Daoist practitioner context of the previous case studies.

All the case studies are summarized in a concluding chapter, which again takes Jacques Derrida as its most significant theoretical guide, in particular his idea of *différance* (its importance for the study only becomes clear in this last section; the reader would have benefitted from an earlier introduction). As is often case, the theoretical musings only partially reflect the content of the case studies (and vice versa), but the author does certainly seek to provide his own take on performance theory. His rather universalistic approach to the interpretation of the importance of a “medium” could usefully be elaborated.

With its twofold structure, the monograph is of value both for theoreticians of (new) media techniques (particularly for those with a penchant for the French poststructuralist intellectual and philosophical tradition) and for those interested in aspects of the contemporary religious history of South-East Asia. From a religious studies perspective, the approach is enlivened by the framing of the thesis through theatre studies. Its focus on lived experience and its meticulous description serve as an ideal guide through the hands-on engagement with the various examples. This overall focus on practice comes somewhat at the expense of the religious traditions themselves, or, in other words, in some instances the reader would have benefitted from clearer contextualization of the aspects being described. Nevertheless, the study provides fresh insight on both the theoretical and empirical levels.