



Terry Hu

Writing Her Transition from Actor to New Age Authority in Taiwan

This article discusses the ways in which Terry Hu (Hu Yinmeng), a movie star turned translator and author, generated religious authority to become the earliest high-profile proponent of the New Age in Taiwan. Her career offers a new perspective on the late-twentieth-century transnational circulation of New Age thought; we can see how she drew on this global phenomenon to emerge as a hybrid authority in the rapidly changing society of post-martial law Taiwan. Her father was a politician and as a child she developed a high level of proficiency in English before becoming a famous actor. However, dissatisfaction with the film industry and a chaotic marriage and divorce led her to explore solutions to her personal issues, including reading a variety of American spiritual and self-help literature and going on a New Age-inspired individual retreat in New York City in 1988. This journey, represented as a spiritual auto-hagiography in her publications—especially *Ancient Future* (1990)—ultimately led her to deeply embrace the transformative potential and cosmologies of the New Age. Hu's spiritual practice included writing, translation, and retreat, and she leveraged her existing celebrity to develop a new fluid identity, blending elements of the authors she translated with selected aspects of her own lived experience, emerging with a type of hybrid authority that is relevant to the study of the New Age globally and of religion in Chinese societies.

KEYWORDS: Taiwan—New Age—translation—text—celebrity—authority

Terry Hu (Hu Yinmeng) was born in Taichung in 1953. Following the chaos of the civil war on the mainland, in 1949 her parents fled China to Taiwan where her father held a position as a legislator in the re-established Legislative Yuan of the Republic of China. He encouraged her studies of English and her mother often took her to watch foreign films. She grew up near a Christian church in Taichung and later attended a Methodist boarding school in Taipei. Beginning in 1974, she claimed to have starred in around forty films and had retired from the industry by 1988. In this time Hu developed a public persona that transcended film: she had published two books, translated an acting manual, featured in make-up advertisements, recorded an album and, reflecting her high profile, became a magazine cover girl. In reading these early texts, evidence of her deepening spiritual practices and resultant burgeoning authority becomes apparent and, importantly, the roots of her integral role in the development of the New Age in Taiwan are evident. After a period of retreat in New York in 1988, over the next eighteen months Hu wrote a monthly magazine column on the New Age. Her third book, *Ancient Future* (1990), drew heavily on this material, and its biographical information provides us with a framework through which her evolving authority may be gauged. Hu also translated several texts in the 1990s, primarily the works of Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895–1986) and Ken Wilber (1949–), before denouncing the genre at decade’s end (yet even in 2019 she very much remains engaged with the *content* of the New Age). Building on her earlier career as a glamorous and cosmopolitan celebrity, she established her authority through a series of books, articles, and translations where she articulated her evolving version of the New Age.

In her writing, Hu refers to a series of events she imbues with spiritual significance, presented to elevate her from being a celebrity with excellent English-language skills to an authority in a global religious system, apposite for readers in late-twentieth-century Taiwan. She built on her pre-existing image in the media and then used a media-informed framework to articulate how to employ New Age thought in daily life. She thoroughly documented her transformative experiences to demonstrate her deepening spiritual knowledge and evolution toward being more than just a glamorous celebrity. Hu constructed a decades-long narrative in which the act of writing and process of retreat were presented as authenticity-generating performances. She became a site where martial-law-era cinematic celebrity evolved into post-martial-law-era religious authority. This was most evident in her

publications where she both helped establish the New Age as a suitable form of spiritual practice and demonstrated how she embodied its transformational potential. Hu presented herself (and was represented by her publishers) as an ideal of the New Age; she was not only an expert but also an exemplar for readers, who could model their own spiritual practice through the various solutions she demonstrated. Her authority was derived from the combination of perceived self-mastery and residual celebrity.

Hu's transition from being a movie star to a spiritual figure, how her original celebrity still lingers decades after retiring from film, and the difficulty in untangling these two fields of endeavor, suggest why she is novel in the study of religion. As Chris Rojek noted, "Celebrity culture is no substitute for religion. Rather, it is the milieu in which religious belonging and recognition are now enacted" (Rojek 2001, 97). Through studying Hu's careers, we see how her initial celebrity—especially her reputation as being a "classic beauty," expert in foreign (American) culture, and rebellious—were essential to her later career. And, through careful reading of her celebrity-era writings, it is evident that more than just depicting the glamorous charisma of the movie star, this was a time when she established in the public mind her nascent interest in personal development and the spiritual. In this sense, it is pertinent to consider how Hu framed her understanding of acting as a means for self-improvement and even as a spiritual discipline. Here Hu somewhat reworks Rojek's concept, in that celebrity culture was the milieu in which her religious belonging and recognition was *incubated*, offering a foundation for her later turn to the New Age.

As of the early twenty-first century, the New Age is now a mature and established part of Taiwan's sphere of religious activities (S. Chen 2008, 84). The origins of the New Age as it was presented in Taiwan emerged from America's 1960s counterculture: a commercialized, syncretic, and diverse (and occasionally contradictory) set of philosophies and practices generally designed to facilitate individual development and societal (or even global) evolution. Incredibly popular around the world and often reflecting strong regional variations, the "New Age" is now often a pejorative term and the milieu may be referred to as "mind, body, spirit" or even just as "spirituality," among other names. Based on my research over the past decade, publishers in Taiwan are driving the development of the New Age in sinophone markets, imbuing it with specific characteristics (such as emphasizing the translations of particular foreign authors or spiritual entities) that circulate in the region and can subsequently influence the evolution of localized spiritualities. The development of Taiwan's New Age movement began in the early 1970s, when the various modes of thought and practice that now comprise it were translated by local authors, often women, who had lived in the United States (C. Chen 2002, abstract; S. Chen 2008, 81). This process increased after martial law was lifted in 1987 and publishing became easier. The Fine Press started the first book series devoted specifically to the New Age in 1989, and other publishers soon followed. C. C. Wang (Wang Jiqing, 1941–), who had already translated Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet* (1970) and three of Jane Roberts's Seth books, led the Fine Press's project, and Hu was part of her editorial collective.

Examining the origin of most texts translated in the 1990s, Taiwan's early New Age reflected that of the United States, although it did gradually begin to develop characteristics of its own. Authors and translators grounded their work in the local religious vocabulary, and therefore certain concepts appeared more Buddhist or Confucian in Taiwan than they did in the original texts. For instance, Wang drew on Neo-Confucian ideas to articulate her understanding of the New Age (Wang 1997, 205–6), and, as she noted later in her autobiography, Hu deliberately used Buddhist terminology in her 1991 translation of Krishnamurti's *Explorations into Insight* to make it more appealing to local readers (Hu 1991; Hu 1999a, 245). Notably, in the last decade a number of New Age and related teachers from Taiwan, including Hu, have developed high profiles in China. At the time of writing, over thirty clips of Hu's lectures and interviews were available on the video platform Soku.com, and a number of her translations (plus her autobiography) have been reprinted in simplified characters for the Chinese market.

Hu is important to the history of Taiwan's New Age movement not just because of her pre-existing celebrity or because she is still active thirty years after her New Age turn. Having devoted herself to disseminating the teachings she favored, she became the movement's highest-profile proponent by appearing in a range of electronic and print media. And while she did not translate as many books as Wang or some other translators, she—more than anyone else at that time—documented her transformation into a New Age enthusiast and, with her accumulating authority, into a New Age figurehead. The author and creator of the Fine Press, Tsao Yu-fang (Cao Youfang, 1942–2009), articulated this most precisely when she described Hu as “the first domestic leader of the New Age” (Tsao 1991, v). In her 2012 novel *Yujian weizhi de ziji* (Encountering your unknown self), which sold very well on both sides of the Taiwan Straits, the Taiwan-born and Beijing-based author and teacher Tiffany Chang (Zhang Defen, 1962–) based a character on Hu, demonstrating how she had become a spiritual meta-teacher: guiding readers in reality *and* in fiction.

Translating foreign works is integral to the authority that Hu and Wang developed (as it was later for Chang, who translated Eckhart Tolle's *A New Earth* in 2008 and his workbook based on the best-selling *The Power of Now* in 2009). In fostering their own religious authority via translating the works of foreign teachers and authors, these women wove the authority of foreign (and often male) authors into their own experiences and understandings, creating a platform through which they developed hybrid spiritual identities. I suggest that such identities are constantly open to innovation through translating new works, adapting to emerging trends, and adjusting to social conditions, thereby imbuing the authors with the freedom and creativity to adjust to market conditions and personal changes.

Hu's account of the origins of the New Age in Taiwan generally asserted her primacy. She did not fully account for the experience of other important translators and writers (such as C. C. Wang), whose lives and revelations were considerably different to her own. Therefore, it is beyond the scope of this article to articulate a suitably nuanced account of how other key figures represented their own expertise. That said, Hu's narrative does provide important insights as to the roles of

gender, celebrity, and text in the generation and evolution of New Age authority in Taiwan. Importantly, we can see how her sense of spiritual curiosity was long present and, by looking deep into her oeuvre, that it is possible to recontextualize her pre–New Age experiences considering her later career. In studying these texts, it is useful to see them as a spiritual auto-hagiography: in reading them side-by-side they form a coherent narrative that documents her transcendental experiences, legitimizes her professed expertise, and articulates her authority. Even though it may be argued that her film career–era publications were not outwardly “New Age,” they possess enough relevant content to form part of this larger, invented text. Especially when in her later works Hu refers to challenges and breakthroughs from her youth and how they have influenced her later choices, it is evident that she is attempting to craft these into a coherent account that culminates with her developing authority as a New Age figure.

The confessional nature of her writing directly feeds on a public curiosity to know more about celebrity life. With this being the case, the New Age movement in Taiwan (certainly in its earlier phase) was more than just translations of foreign texts or Chinese cultural reinterpretations of these: it was partly characterized by the ability of authors and translators to write themselves into the milieu through spiritual auto-hagiographies where they augmented their own experiences with the authority of those they translated. These authors and translators gave readers more than just ideas and philosophies for self-exploration and understanding; they became figures relevant to Taiwanese society that interested readers could model themselves on. Such self-representation of the transnational New Age is fundamental to the generation of seemingly authentic spiritual authority, evident in Hu’s spiritual auto-hagiography. In this context, however, the extent to which Hu drew upon Buddhism (which imagines the nature of the self and emphasizes renouncing the ego) as a way to frame her understanding of the New Age and connect with a broader audience (thereby possibly enhancing her own sense of self and ego, and making some money too) may appear contradictory. Her knack for tapping into the 1980s New Age zeitgeist in the United States and constantly finding new foreign authors whose translations would be relevant to readers in Taiwan indicates that, beyond any sense of emotional transformation she experienced, Hu was a shrewd observer of trends in Taiwan and abroad and was able to connect with and manipulate these so as to build a career.

GLIMPSES OF THE SPIRITUAL IN HU’S EARLY WRITING

After dropping out of the German department at Fu Jen Catholic University and living in New York for a year, Hu returned to Taipei, where her acting career developed quickly. Her first film *The Life God* was a runner up in the 1975 Golden Horse Awards for best feature film and claimed awards for best supporting actor and best non-Western musical. Beyond acting, she also had the opportunity to publish her writings.

Hu’s first book, *Huyan mengyu* (Talking nonsense, sleep talking), was published in October 1980, just months after her brief high-profile marriage to Li Ao

(1935–2018) ended. Li Ao emerged as a key dissident during Taiwan’s period of martial law, writing essays and books on a wide range of topics. Jailed twice, he had a strong admirer in Hu, who was nearly twenty years his junior. Their nearly four-month-long marriage has been a topic of public interest for nearly four decades and he wrote and talked about her and their time together many times; no stranger to the public spotlight, Li Ao offered an alternative (and not always flattering) perspective on Hu. As a writer and public intellectual, it may be that Li Ao also continued to use Hu’s early celebrity to boost his own career given the popular interest in her and in their brief marriage—her early celebrity was more than just a promotional tool for herself, as he drew on it too. Even though the aspects of Hu’s life revealed in “Talking Nonsense” are more material than spiritual (and at times mundane), her self-depiction as cosmopolitan and blessed with a self-reflective and exploratory nature provides valuable insights into how she began to generate her spiritual authority.

“Talking Nonsense” was a compilation of her articles published in *Gongshang Shibao* (Commercial times) from December 1978 to February 1980, along with some longer essays and a 1980 article reprinted from *Lianhebao* (United daily news). Feeling melancholy after returning from her year in New York, Hu began writing down her experiences abroad. She did this following a conversation with a friend, Chang Shi-kuo (Zhang Xiguo, 1944–), a fellow exchange student, noted science fiction author, and future university professor. After she began writing for the “Commercial Times” in late 1978, Hu began to notice an inner change. She wrote:

I gradually realized that writing a column was not some sort of pleasure; it was a type of “psychological healing.” In the past, I had used tears to dispel the thoughts in my mind; now I started to study how reflecting with reason could turn emotions into words on the page. (Hu 1980, 2)

This is possibly the earliest example of Hu reflecting on the role of writing (and, later, translating) in assuaging her psychological discomfort, and it would later be a means through which she demonstrated the extent to which she embodied the works that she promoted. Even though in this book she was often merely depicting her life as a globetrotting star, it set the tone for her future ruminations on writing and translating. During this time, she claimed to have begun studying reason and emotional transformation, themes that emerge in a number of chapters in the book. When referring to emotional transformation, I understand it as the conscious application of specific ideas or practices designed to elevate or evolve one’s (generally self-identified) feelings from a negative or less-developed level to a positive or more highly evolved one. In the case of Hu, her self-identification with commonly understood emotional states—and how she drew upon New Age practices and other self-help discourses to recognize their existence and potential, and then navigate between them—gave readers an understandable and possibly useful example upon which they could model their own programs of emotional transformation.

However, the comparatively mundane rendering of her youth found in “Talking Nonsense” contrasts with claims in her fourth book, the autobiography *Siwang yu tongnü zhi wu* (Death and the maiden, 1999). Hu later wrote that during the

divorce proceedings she had several unusual spiritual experiences, and this appears to be the time when her exploration of the New Age and related practices accelerated (which possibly occurred after “Talking Nonsense” was published). These included a perplexing instance of clairaudience, the supranormal “ability to hear voices—particularly of spirits. . . . [It] may be another source of information retrieval for New Age channeling” (York 2004, 52). She wrote of hearing a calming female voice saying in English “I want you to change . . . I want you to change . . . I want you to change.” Startled, Hu thought to herself:

I was very curious about what just happened and had no way to rationally explain it. Who was she? Was she a spirit guide as is found in parapsychology? Or was it my subconscious hoping I can expand? Why did she use English? Furthermore, why was it such pleasant and standard American English? (Hu 1999a, 168–69)

She also found meaning in a period of repeated nighttime clairaudience based on Krishnamurti’s advice to his biographer on her similar experience (Jayakar 1986, 131). In these examples Hu directly linked her own burgeoning spiritual awareness to the authority of one of her favorite teachers, using his explanation as evidence of her own progress. Hu later found further supporting evidence for her clairaudience in the Jung-inspired work of Ken Wilber, embedding herself in the global community of adherents to such beliefs.

Furthermore, in “Death and the maiden” Hu wrote that during her teens she experienced a series of parapsychological phenomena (*teyi xianxiang*). The recollection or depiction of such profound experiences during youth is an established trope in Chinese religious biography and is also found in accounts of leaders and followers in Japanese new religions. In demonstrating supernatural powers, “the later august position that the subject reaches can be seen as having been prefigured, if not preordained” (Penny 2012, 81). These examples inserted by Hu into her life story appear to serve the same purpose. While somewhat mundane, Hu’s recollection of early supernatural experiences indicates how she emphasized that she long possessed a latent spiritual power. Even though she did not mention these in her earlier writings, they were presented as being integral in propelling her toward later efforts of self-exploration (Hu 1999a, 68–69).

In her autobiography (published nearly thirty years after the event), Hu revealed that for a period during her high school years she was a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, informally known as the Mormon Church. Her pragmatic reason for joining the church was to be near the young “Elders,” missionaries from abroad (primarily the USA) and to practice English (Hu 1999a, 71). Hu left a strong impression on her fellow local Mormons, with the sister of one recalling her vivacious entrance to the church:

the first time Terry Hu came to the church no one knew whom she was, nor did she know anyone there. Not only did she lack any of the nerves of the newcomer, she even initiated conversation with some of the foreign believers . . . frequently laughing to her heart’s content and seeming extremely pleased with herself. . . . I had never seen a Chinese girl so confident, natural and relaxed with foreigners. . . . This girl was really remarkable. (W. Hu 1976, 95)

Written at the time of her emergence as a celebrity and years before her outward turn toward matters spiritual, this anecdote concisely articulates Hu's early public image as an expert in English and interested in the world outside of Taiwan. Yet to have lived in the USA or another English-speaking territory, she was still confident enough in her language ability to converse with the Mormon missionaries.

In "Death and the maiden," Hu elaborated on her bond with the hippie movement as it became popular in the USA and other developed nations in the late 1960s. She wanted to join the hippies and "destroy the attitude of lethargy and the illusion of isolation" (Hu 1999a, 74–75). Given her familiarity with American culture through film, language, and the Mormon church, her curiosity in the counterculture might have been an extension of her already-established interest in the various dimensions of American culture.

Hu published her second book *Yinmenghu* (Immensee) in 1982. In his preface, Chang Shi-kuo compared Hu's work favorably with Theodor Storm's 1849 novella *Immensee* and the lake Immensee in Switzerland, which he had visited, as "similarly full of changes" (Chang 1999, 7).¹ Hu was forthright in declaring "Immensee" to be part of her personal evolution. In her preface she wrote:

The unexpected change in my first marriage healed more than 20 years of depression. It made me suddenly realize how my response to facing challenges was strong. Life's fundamental approach was joyous. The dreams and doubts of *Talking Nonsense, Sleep Talking* had changed into the action and confidence of *Immensee* . . .

Nowadays in the era of *Immensee's* maturity, I still affirm the value of love and human nature's magnificence. At the same time using the method of non-confrontation, I can accomplish this life's search for the "self." (Hu 1999b, 11–12)

Once again in "Immensee" Hu surveyed life from her position as a celebrity. More important is her broadening spiritual exploration and her willingness to share details of this with her readers. Hu wrote of encounters with a Hong Kong astrologer, Jungian dream symbolism, and reincarnation. Also evident is the development of her cosmology: she can be seen to be adopting and expressing certain concepts familiar to New Age religion.

In the chapter "Ruguo—wo de xia yi beizi" (If . . . my next life) Hu mused on the creative possibilities offered by reincarnation. Having many plans for her future lives, she thought being an archeologist working at China's Dunhuang caves, famous for their impressive collection of Buddhist figures and paintings, would be ideal. If her reincarnation was not limited to countries or solar systems, she harbored the utopian dream of being an alien devoted to bringing about universal harmony (Hu 1999b, 192). The ability to not only be reincarnated but to have some say in the form in which one is reincarnated is strongly reminiscent of the notion of self-directed reincarnation found in the teachings of Seth. Likewise, and along with UFOs, "beings from other planets" appear in the New Age movement as part of a discourse on evolution and the future of humanity (Rothstein 2003, 135). "Immensee" is evidence of Hu's growing interest in the New Age and establishes the context for her later writings that would be published after her film career ended.

In watching Hu's films, it becomes apparent that not only was she typecast as cosmopolitan, she was able to leverage this image into her later career in the New Age. Of her many films, she regarded Edward Yang's (Yang Dechang, 1947–2007) *That Day, on the Beach* (1983) as the only one that could be considered a work of art (Hu 1999a, 133). *That Day* was one of the early films in the movement that came to be known as New Taiwan Cinema. Starring Sylvia Chang (Zhang Aijia, 1953–), with whom Hu costarred in the propaganda film *Victory* (1975) and the romance *Warmth in Autumn* (1976), *That Day* was nominated for best feature film, best director, and best original screenplay at the 1983 Golden Horse Awards. Hu played the role of Tan Weiqing, a famous pianist, and was required to draw on her German language skills acquired at Fu Jen for some of the dialogue. Playing an expert in European languages was a common role for Hu: in a scene in *Warmth in Autumn* she tutored English and in *Far Away from Home* (1977) her character was fluent in Italian. She (as an individual) and her characters (roles she performed) frequently depicted women comfortable with the local and the foreign; in slipping between these roles Hu increasingly demonstrated intertextual transnational sensibilities. In a sense, Tan shared similarities with Hu as a paragon of refined female modernity. Both experienced difficulties in love and with their family and had spent time abroad. This enmeshment of her public representations in film and her accounts of her private difficulties reappeared again at the end of her film career.

Reunion (1986) was one of Hu's final films. She starred as a television current affairs journalist, and the film reflected on her and her school chums at various intervals throughout their lives, focusing on their adult efforts to help the mentally disabled. *Reunion* was a vehicle for Hu and her co-star (and friend, and later noted proponent of Tibetan Buddhism) Ding Nai-chu (Ding Naizhu, 1953–) to depict fictionalized versions of themselves that, in turn, helped generate idealized versions of their burgeoning real identities as spiritually aware cosmopolitan young women. By 1986 Hu's frustrations with the shallowness of Taiwan's movie industry were strong and, with Ding, *Reunion* appears as an attempt to remedy this, through their characters struggling to improve the lot of a marginalized social group. Furthermore, it may be that the social awareness depicted in *Reunion* means that, for some of its actors at least, it functioned as type of spiritual practice; film became a medium for them to cultivate and express a deeper understanding about life.

TRANSLATION AND A DEEPENING SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Hu's first translation was *Respect for Acting* by Uta Hagen (1919–2004). Hagen's original, co-authored with Haskel Frankel, was published in 1973 and Hu's translation was published in 1987 with the title translated as *Zunzhong biaoyan yishu* ("Respect for the art of acting"), emphasizing Hagen's belief that, like painting or music, acting is also an art requiring practice and discipline. Hu believed that acting held great potential for personal feeling. Recalling a conversation she had with theater director and her friend from the campus folk music scene Stan Lai (Lai Shengchuan, 1954–) about Tibetan Buddhism and meditative contemplation, Hu expressed the extent of her faith in acting. She wrote that "art's highest

expression of ‘eternity’ is close to religious,” suggesting the possibility of spiritual transcendence through performance (Hu 1987, 7). This conviction coupled with her frustrations from old-fashioned movie making in Taiwan drove her to translate Hagen’s text for a sinophone readership. She implied that the spontaneity and naivety of her early film career had been tempered by the theory she had learned later in life, such as Hagen’s methods. This also suggests that she was reframing her early acting, regardless of the quality of the films, as a spiritual practice. Hu was further conflating acting with her own personal development and, either consciously or unconsciously, identifying this as a step in furthering her burgeoning authority.

More than just enabling her to reflect on the supposed benefits of her film career, translating *Respect for Acting* allowed Hu to develop a new form of spiritual practice. Balancing translation with her other work, such as acting, she found the process to be slow. However, at the end of her preface she noted:

the whole process was like a purification ritual in which, from another perspective, I could see my own strengths and weaknesses. I was also able to thoroughly self-analyze. Could I go so far as to say this book helped me? It was like a Buddhist ritual of my dreams! (Hu 1987, 8)

In an article published just after *Respect for Acting* was translated, Hu claimed she had found a suitable spiritual path, reading classic texts and meditating, suggesting to the public that spiritual exploration had become an important part of her life (“Xiuxing yu tuibian” 1987; Hu 1987, 21). The next important part of this was an individual retreat conducted in her Greenwich Village apartment over nearly six months in New York in 1988. While there she read widely, practiced yoga, and ate healthy food. Hu claimed this retreat was important as it was when she first encountered the work of Krishnamurti, but I suggest even more significant was her recasting of the metropolis of New York, and by extension the whole USA, as a place of spiritual possibility. Only there could she fully connect with its vibrant New Age culture and build on her nascent interests, providing her with a repertoire of texts and transformative experiences to bring back to Taiwan (Farrelly 2017b).

BECOMING A NEW AGE AUTHORITY

Following her return to Taiwan, Hu began promoting New Age religion. One of her first articles was the one-page “The Advent of the New Age” in the May 1988 edition of *Shenü zazhi* (China ladies; Hu 1988, 26). She began the article by reflecting how, until recently, her life was infused with regular emotional turmoil. Having read *Seth Speaks* at the time of her divorce from Li Ao, it was only in 1986 that Hu felt that she had gained a sense of contentment, at least in how she considered contentment in a Buddhist sense. Importantly, it was in this article that she first articulated her understanding of the New Age. Hu described the New Age understanding of life as inherently stable and emotional states as outward projections of individual choices. Each of her seven points empowered readers to exercise agency over their individual emotions, harking to Seth’s core message “you create your own reality” (Roberts 1972).

Hu's next article extolling the New Age was published in the January 1989 edition of *Funü zazhi* (The woman).² An edited transcript of a lecture she gave on December 3, 1988, this longer article allowed Hu to articulate the difficulties inherent in modern life, using her own biography as a case study. In doing so, she was able to share with readers her understanding of what she referred to as the "New Age Movement" (*xinshidai yundong*), tracing its beginning to 1944 (likely Alice Bailey's *Discipleship in the New Age*, published that year). This allowed Hu to provide a more nuanced articulation of the New Age than in her May 1988 article, clearly establishing a number of the concepts that would underpin her later work. Between March 1989 and September 1990 she published a monthly column in "The Woman" called *Xiechu wuzhuang* (Dropping arms) where she shared her breakthroughs in spiritual practice (*xiuxing*). Ten of these articles were ultimately published in *Ancient Future* in March 1990.

Ancient Future encapsulates Hu's vision of New Age religion in 1990. Unlike the other early books in the New Age Series, it has a distinctive cover. Hu is sitting cross-legged and in loose-fitting clothes, her head at a slight angle as she gazes deeply at the camera. Just above her head is a copy of Leonardo da Vinci's "Last Supper," illuminated by a downlight. On the right of the picture is a potted plant and on the left a large geode. This setting was later used in a magazine shoot (Wu 1991, 47). It also echoed her photo from the April 1988 cover of "The Woman" where, dressed in a plain cotton shirt and with Buddhist *mala* beads wrapped around her wrist, she sat contentedly gazing out the window. In contrast to the relatively drab designs of the other books in the series, the design of *Ancient Future* gave readers an immediate visual cue. Hu appears comfortable and at peace, in a private space, curated to demonstrate spiritual open mindedness. Her 1999 autobiography presented Hu in a more dynamic fashion; photographs of her dressed in simple traditional Chinese clothes, dancing outdoors and in abandoned buildings, appeared at the start of each chapter. Her flowing hair and dynamic postures suggest freedom and release, indicating that as Hu neared the age of fifty, she had attained a type of liberation.

Introducing the New Age as being well-established in the West, Hu aimed for *Ancient Future* to allow readers to integrate spiritual practice into their daily lives, incorporating ancient wisdom and modern science, and to do so in a way free from the authority of "artificial organizations or religious groups" (Hu 1990, 3). She proceeded to enthuse how Westerners had successfully incorporated Eastern religious ideas and medical practices into their daily lives. She also praised Shirley MacLaine (1934–), the American movie star and New Age proponent whose books and telemovie of her own spiritual development were immensely popular. Hu wrote herself into *Ancient Future* as the primary conduit for the New Age in Taiwan, using the metaphor of a rainbow bridge, in that she was the connection between Taiwan and the United States (Farrelly 2017b). Her growing self-created authority was increasingly derived from how she could use English to understand foreign ancient cultures, or at least English-language interpretations of these.

The first chapter of *Ancient Future* explores the concept of "I am" (*Benwo ji shi*).³ In exploring her understanding of the religious elements of this idea, both

East and West, Hu once again drew on her own experiences to demonstrate the veracity of the concept. The first time she saw the four Chinese characters for “I am” she said “my mind was like it was hit by a flash of lightning in the middle of summer, a stirring that is impossible to describe and I can go so far as to say it was a vibration” (Hu 1990, 13). Describing the revelation as a vibration suggests that Hu did not merely intellectually understand it, she embodied it too.

The title of the second chapter of *Ancient Future*, “You Create Your Own Reality” is the same as the Seth-derived slogan for the Fine Press’s New Age Series. This chapter is strongly autobiographical; Hu selectively plotted her own life experiences in the context of her recently discovered New Age wisdom. Yet there are many details, especially about her family life, that she only revealed in her autobiography in 1999 (published after both her parents had passed away). Given this discrepancy, it is evident that she was discerning in what she (and her publishers) included when representing herself as a New Age figure. That said, her spiritual inquisitiveness, increasingly present in her publications, fully manifested in *Ancient Future*. She began by recounting the turning point she experienced at the age of twenty-seven, the year after her marriage and divorce to Li Ao. Hu did not reference him or their relationship here, but this would have been common knowledge among her fans at the time and likely among her wider readership in Taiwan.

Hu wrote of the events and emotions that she had developed, creating a spiritual auto-hagiography. She regarded her parents’ unsteady marriage, the emotional tension with her mother, her years at boarding school, her talent for creative work, and struggles with mathematics and science as influencing her progression. Likewise, she shared her feelings of emancipation generated from the folk music she enjoyed while studying at Fu Jen University and hanging out at campus folk music cafes.

Hu was one of the key figures in the campus folk music movement (*xiaoyuan ming yundong*) of the early and mid-1970s (perhaps more for her film celebrity than for her music). This was an important phase of her life as she claimed that rather than her years of spiritual and social experimentation in New York or childhood exposure to American culture and religion, it was actually in Taipei’s folk music cafes where the New Age began to take shape (Hu 1990, 25–26). In this recollection of the semi-counterculture of the campus folk music scene she assembled elements of Western culture to construct an apparently authentic transnational spirituality and demonstrate the extended duration of her engagement with the New Age (Farrelly 2017a).

Hu then detailed the importance of her encounter with the teachings of Seth during her divorce proceedings. Seth is a spirit entity revealed by the American science fiction author and poet Jane Roberts (1929–84). The Seth books sold in large numbers, and his maxim “you create your own reality” became a fundamental concept in America’s New Age. A gift from C. C. Wang (and most likely the original English version), *Seth Speaks: The Eternal Validity of the Soul* complemented Hu’s yoga practice at the time (Chen 1993, 11). Reading this book was a turning point: it became her “bible,” helping her remove self-doubt and experience a feel-

ing of awakening. In particular, the way in which Seth empowered the reader to be the director of his or her own life was a revelation to Hu (Hu 1990, 28).

In *Ancient Future* Hu was effusive in praising the teachings of Seth, feeling he addressed the universal questions asked by humanity so well that it could be considered the representative parapsychology work of the New Age movement. She shared the two passages from *Seth Speaks* that gave her a taste of awakening (Hu 1990, 28). The passages in Jane Roberts's original are:

If your turn of mind is highly intense and you think in vivid mental emotional images, these will be swiftly formed into physical events. If you are also of a highly pessimistic nature, given to thoughts and feelings of potential disaster, then these thoughts will be quite faithfully reproduced in experience. . . .

Consider yourself present as an actor in a play; hardly a new analogy, but a suitable one. The scene is set in the twentieth century. You create the props, the settings, the themes; in fact you write, produce, and act in the entire production—you and every other individual who takes part.

You are so focused on your roles, however; so intrigued by the reality you have created, so entranced by the problems, challenges, hopes and sorrows of your particular roles that you have forgotten they are of your own creation.

(Roberts 1972, 79, 53–54)

Having worked as an actor for much of her adult life, it is not surprising that Seth's analogy of life as a play made sense to Hu. However, this was not a play in which she was at the whim of a director or producer: it was one in which she seemingly had full agency, irrespective of her social status or relationship dramas. Seth empowered Hu to gain control over her life after the turmoil of her brief time with Li Ao. Through applying Seth's ideas, she was able to act out a better life for herself, suggesting to her readers that a deeper personal satisfaction could be attained through performance.

Hu also wrote how late one night she had the realization that Seth's maxim "you create your own reality" is the same as Buddhism's "all phenomena are nothing but consciousness" (Hu 1990, 29–30). She saw Seth and Buddhist thought as both teaching that all external phenomena and fate are actually internal projections. This tendency to render New Age ideas in Buddhist thought not only reflects the syncretic nature of religion in Chinese cultures and the popularity of Buddhism in early post-martial law Taiwan. It also represents Hu's belief that the New Age actually articulated these concepts in a more accessible way than did actual Buddhist texts. Her approach had some support among Buddhists, with the author of a 1993 article suggesting they should remain open to the New Age as it may help more people understand the human condition and, ultimately, become satisfied Buddhists (Zhu 1993, 10–12).

Hu claimed her decision to quit the movie business in 1986 was the result of studying Seth and Buddhist classics (it may also have been brought on by a downturn in Taiwan's film industry and subsequent scarcity of roles). Through participating in classes and discussions she was able to "lift the veil of ignorance" that had prevented her from being true to herself (Hu 1990, 34). She also proposed what she called a simple solution to emotional problems:

The first step is to humbly acknowledge that the ultimate essence of things is single-handedly created by you. If this self-edited, self-directed and self-performed soap opera appears to have deviated from the script, then the first action we must adopt is “self revolution” and change passive acceptance into the initiative to improve. . . .

For those friends still in deep suffering, I say to you “congratulations.” My personal experience has told me that the next step after suffering is endless creativity. But as a prerequisite you must intuitively perceive that “you create your own reality.” (Hu 1990, 37–38)

This conception of life as a performance broadcast for the world indicates the extent to which her life-long interest and participation in movies shaped her understanding of her lived experiences. For Hu, the revelations available in the New Age were simple and intuitive ways to access answers that one already possessed. The wisdom of the New Age was inherent in people; they just needed to have the interest and guidance to access it. At the same time, her expertise appeared self-generated, suggesting her readers could attain something similar.

Hu’s chapter on ecofeminism outlined her views on humanity’s need to change in the urgent context of impending environmental catastrophe (Hu 1990, 111–32). The chapter is a discussion between Hu and Lin Junyi, a professor of zoology. Beginning with Lin’s view that environmental degradation is a product of the patriarchy, in that men exploit the environment in the way that they exploit women, their conversation covered broad territory. Hu expressed her admiration for how the iconic female author San Mao (1943–91) was able to inspire readers in Taiwan and China to rebel. Here Hu suggested that her own rebellious nature arose from the criticism she received from her mother. Rather than being rebellious for the sake of it, Hu feels that she rebelled because she “has the courage to pursue the truth” (Hu 1990, 116). Her drive to facilitate others to engender widespread social change was grounded in anti-authoritarianism.

An important dimension of Hu’s articulation of New Age religion was how it empowered women. She viewed the world (and the human soul) as fundamentally informed by the interplay between the twin modalities of *yin* and *yang*. Violent instances of excessive *yang* (such as the June 1989 massacre in Beijing) could be tempered by the innate *yin* qualities of females. She asserted that because of their greater sensitivity, intuition, and emotional richness, women were more evolved than men (who did not lack these qualities, they were just yet to fully develop them) and therefore integral in ushering in the Aquarian Age (which itself was underpinned by the unity of *yin* and *yang*). Women needed to assert themselves so that they were on the same platform as men, as only once this happened could humanity’s problems be solved (Hu 1990, 140–46). Religious discrimination, such as the inability of women to enter certain Christian priesthoods or attain Buddhahood (at least until they had first been reborn as a man), was something she opposed. Given the “tendency within New Age spirituality to accord women a higher status than is the norm in most mainstream traditions” (York 2004, 71) and that two of her strongest influences at this time were Shirley MacLaine and Marilyn Ferguson (1938–2008, author of the influential New Age text *The Aquarian*

Conspiracy), Hu's centering of feminism in her articulation of the New Age is not surprising. After 1987 feminism became more established in Taiwanese society and was no longer visible merely as a political tool of the ruling Kuomintang (Chen 2009, 21). Her promotion of the New Age as a feminist instrument of empowerment is significant in this climate of growing awareness of, and political engagement with, women's rights. For instance, she wrote that women had certain traits that made them more emotionally sensitive and they represented the strongest force for social reform. Hu, and her publishers, positioned herself as the exemplar of this force in Taiwan: her biography outlined the ways in which she had transformed her own life, demonstrating to readers, especially females, that they too had the agency to freely make similar changes to their own selves.

In November 1990, Hu embarked on a ten-month retreat at the suggestion of Gyatrul Rinpoche (1924–), an exiled Tibetan Buddhist teacher she first encountered in Hong Kong in 1984 and with whom she had met a number of times since. Crossing paths in San Francisco, he apparently recognized fatigue in her and suggested that she go on retreat. During those ten months at her home in Taipei's central Da'an district, she translated the work of Krishnamurti and engaged in self-cultivation practices. One of her discoveries during this retreat was that Krishnamurti spoke of *chan* (zen) (Wu 1994, 118). Once again, this suggests her increasing predilection for framing her emergent New Age cosmology in Buddhist terms. The work of translating prompted Hu to have some vivid dreams. For instance, she recalled a series of dreams where she travelled with, and learned from, Krishnamurti (Hu 1999a, 247). Recalling this experience, more than ten years after his death, indicates that Hu was emphasizing her legitimacy as his student, even though she never personally met him.

Over these months Hu translated two Krishnamurti books (one of which was his conversation with the physicist David Bohm). In translating *Explorations into Insight* and editing her manuscript, Hu claimed to have “understood the distinct flavor of liberation” (Hu 1999a, 250). By January 1997, she claimed to have translated more than five million characters of Krishnamurti's work, and this had “seemingly transformed the blood inside my body” (Hu 1997, 22). Once again, this is an example of Hu affecting personal change (this time physical) through the practice of translation. Importantly, this also imbued her with a particular authority that no one else could possibly possess, as she was (at that time) the main translator of Krishnamurti's work into Chinese and therefore the one most intimately aware of the nuances of his teachings.

Hu featured in two “classic editions” of *Qianneng jikan* (Hidden potential quarterly, HPQ) in 1994, a magazine directly appealing to a readership similar to that of the New Age Series. In addition to being an advisor to the publishers, Hu was ubiquitous in the magazine, appearing in articles and advertisements. In these magazines, it is evident how her eminence as a New Age figure was expanding beyond just being an author and translator. From the front cover, where her article *Neixin de yiyu* (The alien land in your heart) was listed, she appeared throughout the January 1994 HPQ. This included an advertisement for the radio program she co-hosted with Xu Yiming and Liu Qiufeng, *Xinshidai de xunxi* (New Age news),

and another for a set of video cassettes that she and Liu Qiufeng had recorded called *Siwang wu ju* (Death without fear). Also published by HPQ, this set was marketed using Hu's image and her reputation as an authority on the New Age. Covering topics such as religious materialism, relationships between the two sexes, reincarnation and the desire realm, and loneliness, Hu was pitched as an expert who "shares her post-practice intuitive perceptions on religion and spiritual practices and, possessing a clear and incisive analysis, investigates the essence of life and spiritual emotions" (Hu 1994, 113). The center of HPQ included advertisements for a series of workshops, some convened by HPQ figures such as Hu and Liu and others by foreigners.

Hu began "The Alien Land in Your Heart" by introducing a friend of hers who she had been counselling. Worldly wise, sweet tempered, soft of speech, and kind hearted, her friend had studied with Tibetan lamas and "If you were not careful you would conclude: a complete woman" (Hu 1994, 26). This friend, possibly hypothetical, can be read as Hu's target market. She is of a pleasing disposition and works hard, yet despite her efforts practicing in religious systems, she remains unfulfilled. Importantly, she has a connection with Hu. Her friend had listened to the videotapes but was still perplexed. Hu took this opportunity to explain the purpose of the tapes: the focal point was not the two hosts, it was "exploring the truth of psychological activity" and through the shared experiences of the hosts to "specify the insights of New Age prophets and progressively point out traditional ways of spiritual practice and questions of ideology" (Hu 1994, 27). This explanation indicates a possible tension arising from Hu's growing status as a spiritual figure. While her celebrity seemed to attract readers and, now with the videotapes, attract viewers, she still had to emphasize the importance of her experience over her personality. To separate the two is difficult given how closely, and over a long time, Hu had articulated her spiritual development (through the platforms available to her as a celebrity) as a successful, sophisticated, and spiritually inquisitive woman.

This article included an important section on how Hu pitched her New Age. Building on the example of her friend, she explicitly addressed the difficulty faced by females seeking spiritual satisfaction in Taiwan. She wrote:

The awakening of female nature is the awakening of human nature. We also need to soberly examine how female nature has become accustomed to a patriarchal society, how much real self has vanished and how much spontaneity and uprightness has been repressed. (Hu 1994, 28)

Here Hu reinforced the negative influence of patriarchy on the human condition. However, in linking female awakening to the awakening of human nature, she empowered her readers to recognize the broader, society-wide benefits of their individual spiritual practice.

GOING BEYOND THE NEW AGE

Within ten years Terry Hu transformed from being the most recognizable advocate of New Age religion in Taiwan to a skeptic. She closed her 1999 autobiography with a rebuttal of the New Age and its key slogan in Taiwan, "you create your

own reality.” This strong switch in belief is closely linked to two important events in Hu’s life: her reading and subsequent translation of the works of Ken Wilber and the three-year-long health crisis that began just after the birth of her daughter, Jiesheng. She was born in late November 1994 and Hu became ill just two days later (with what later became a 7kg ovarian tumor), beginning a long period of illness and healing. Her rebuttal may also reflect what Massimo Introvigne termed the “crisis” of the New Age in America in the 1990s, where commercialization and millenarian ambiguity led to a drop in popularity (Introvigne 2003, 59–60).

Ken Wilber is an American philosopher of consciousness and psychology whose work has been widely read within the New Age movement. Historian of religion Wouter Hanegraaff dealt with Wilber’s work and ideas in detail, and introduced him as being

regarded as the foremost theoretician in the transpersonal movement. All his publications are characterized by a brilliant ability to combine information from a wide variety of sources into an at times stunningly elegant synthesis.

(Hanegraaff 1996, 58)

Wilber recognized that the New Age movement expressed some profound ideas but was critical of it, colorfully decrying it as “A yuppified postmodern version of Christian Science” (Wilber 2000, 46). In *Grace and Grit*, the account of his wife’s struggles with terminal cancer, he criticized the notion that “you create your own reality” as having “its basis in narcissistic and borderline pathology.” This was illustrated in mail he and his wife received that suggested she brought on cancer through her own thoughts (Wilber 2000, 266). Wilber’s problematizing of such a key concept had a profound effect on Hu and she began to gradually reassess her connection with the New Age.

Hu’s three years of illness prompted her to investigate a range of diets, exercises, and treatment as she sought relief and health. Among the most novel was with Alex Orbito (1940–), a “psychic surgeon” from the Philippines, who she became aware of through the writings of Shirley MacLaine.⁴ Upon her return to Taiwan, Hu discovered that, despite Orbito’s treatment, her tumor had actually grown in size. Having exhausted the possibilities held by alternative medicine, in October 1997 she opted for conventional surgery (Hu 1999a, 309–332). Ten days before undergoing surgery, she picked a book “randomly” from her shelf. Her choice: *Grace and Grit* by Ken Wilber (Hu 2011, 10).

Hu’s translation of *Grace and Grit* was published in November 1998 and her autobiography followed in July 1999. In it, she urged “New Age friends” to read chapter fifteen of *Grace and Grit* where Wilber provided an “incisive examination” of the concept of “you create your own reality” (Hu 1999a, 358), no longer enthusiastically equating it with Buddhist teachings on material reality. In Hu’s writings it appears that her illness and the searching it prompted were the catalysts in her discarding the label “New Age.” In doing this, she did not necessarily move away from the subject material she had promoted and continued to expound the wisdom of Krishnamurti (without identifying him as New Age). Essentially, she managed to move beyond the New Age label while maintaining (depending on

how close one adhered to the metaphysics expounded in the Seth teachings) her New Age authority.

Despite this shift in identity, in her autobiography Hu did not shrink away from her time promoting the New Age, although she was more circumspect than she had been earlier. For instance, she felt that the teachings of Seth did not give her the feeling of “finding it” but the book was valuable nonetheless (Hu 1999a, 172). Since then she has translated many books, some of which were overtly Buddhist and others that could be classified as New Age, consolidating her status in Taiwan and developing a readership in China.

CONCLUSION

Terry Hu was the most visible figure in the early period of Taiwan’s New Age. The transnational sensibilities she drew on over several decades to create herself as a spiritual authority have embedded her in sinophone discourses of popular spirituality. Her charismatic authority was acutely enabled by the political, economic, and social conditions of post–World War II Taiwan, where her intriguing life story of privilege, celebrity, and travel provided the means to develop as an author and translator.

Given opportunities in various print media to candidly document selected aspects of her life over two decades, she has presented us with a spiritual auto-hagiography of performative emotional transformation that functions as a model upon which readers may mold their practices. Noticeably, and despite demonstrating certain elements of New Age thought, the earlier part of this decades-long process was not documented in a New Age narrative, only to be later re-written in such a manner. As an actor and translator of acting techniques, Hu appears to have been comfortable with not only portraying certain inner thoughts for an audience but also the idea of her life as a type of performance, a discursive mode she had developed as an actor (on film) and a celebrity (in the media). In candidly describing her personal travails and the various ideas and practices—New Age and otherwise—that she adopted in solving these, Hu demonstrated the creative control of how one could be empowered to work on one’s self. She simultaneously presented herself as advanced (in that she possessed the requisite language skills and cultural capital to understand the esoteric elements of the New Age) and a pioneer (as among those from Taiwan as she was the first to deeply explore certain teachings).

Activities of which Hu wrote to emphasize her authority were writing, translation, and retreat. Writing was not merely a means of expressing herself—it also held a healing potential. Translation was more than just bringing English-language material to readers in Taiwan—it allowed her to embody and represent the content of the texts she worked on. She would work on translations while on retreat, where she created a space to elevate her spiritual practice and assert her mastery of knowledge taught by figures such as Krishnamurti. Hu closely aligned herself with Krishnamurti and Ken Wilber, and by creating connections with them through dreams or text, she attempted to reflect their authority to her readers in Taiwan. In combining these aspects, and echoing her earlier career, Hu’s promotion of the New Age became a performance where she used the considerable authority of the

aforementioned authors she introduced to Taiwan as platforms upon which she could map aspects of her own life to generate a new and evolving hybrid identity that blended her earlier film celebrity, the teachings of those she translated, and her own experiences and revelations. In the global history of what is broadly termed “the New Age,” Hu’s understanding of translation as a spiritual practice and the way she grafted the authority of translated authors onto herself is important: future studies of translation in the New Age (and in religion more broadly) should consider her example.

In her articulations of the New Age, Hu asserted women as being particularly receptive to New Age thought and having a vital role to play in planetary transformation. In outlining these qualities (and, at times, incorporating the authority of male figures such as Krishnamurti and Wilber), she implied that she possessed them, thereby further asserting her status as a leading figure of Taiwan’s New Age and an inventive individual in the New Age’s global dissemination.

AUTHOR

Paul J. Farrelly is a recent graduate from the Australian Centre on China in the World at The Australian National University, where he currently works as a research officer. He has published several book chapters on innovation and transmission in emergent forms of spirituality and new religious movements in Taiwan and China. Details about his publications are available at www.pauljfarrelly.com.

NOTES

1. Coincidentally, there is a café named Immensee in Hu’s film *Warmth in Autumn* (1976).
2. The title of this article refers to a “New Era” (*xinshiji*) while the term used in the article is “New Age” (*xinshidai*), hinting the accepted Chinese translation was still yet to be finalized.
3. The extent to which Hu was exposed to the teachings and activities of the “I AM” religious activity is unclear. The “I AM” teachings were revealed by Guy and Edna Ballard and developed the ideas of Ascended Masters from the Theosophical Society. The “I AM Presence,” as taught by the Ballards, was “the energy supporting all the manifested world” (Introigne 2006, 498).
4. Shirley MacLaine enthusiastically introduced Orbito and his healing techniques in *Going Within* (MacLaine 1989, 215–239).

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