



Seven Strands of the Serpent's Tail

Creativity and Cultural Improvisation in the Making of a Ritual Whip in Contemporary Taiwan

Among the most ubiquitous ritual implements in modern Taiwan, the ritual whip functions to dispel demons and to summon spirit soldiers, the material embodiment of a fearsome serpent deity. Known as Saint Golden Whip, a standard ritual whip has a wooden handle carved in the likeness of a snake, a dragon, or a hybrid of the two, and a thong at least six feet in length, woven from straw rope. Despite the prevalence of these ritual whips, scholars have yet to examine the people involved in making them; the stories of these artists have largely been lost to history, their methods unrecorded and unknown. This article details as a case study the production of a single ritual whip, telling the stories of the carver who shapes its handle and the weaver who braids its tail. Both artists discover their own improvisations to navigate the space between invention and inheritance, highlighting how cultural traditions take on new forms and find new expressions, as these traditions move forward from person to person, from one generation to the next.

Keywords: Taiwan—material religion—Daoism—ritual—whip—craft—cultural improvisation

Winged serpent with one horn, Great Saint,
Body of limitless length and boundless breadth.
Our hero takes flight, Heaven and Earth shake, and
Malevolent demons and ghastly monsters all startle and scatter.

Invocation of Saint Golden Whip¹
(*Jinbian shengzhe zhou*)

Prevalent across disparate ritual lineages throughout Taiwan, this invocation praises the serpent god, Saint Golden Whip (*Jinbian shengzhe*), for his exorcistic capabilities. Imagined as an enormous winged serpent with a single horn, the saint soars through heaven and earth, his presence alone vanquishing all of the harmful spirits in his path. In the lifeworld of Taiwan's common religion, when people speak of Saint Golden Whip, they may be referring to the deity, but most often the term points to the deity's material counterpart, a ritual whip, among the most common and most important ritual implements of ritual specialists for at least the last several centuries. Also known as a ritual rope (*fasuo*), a ritual cord (*fasheng*), a ritual whip (*fabian*), or a purifying whip (*jingbian*), a standard *jinbian shengzhe* has a wooden handle carved to resemble the head and upper body of a snake, a dragon, or a hybrid of the two, and a thong at least six feet in length, woven from several strands of straw rope.² In modern times, these whips travel with ritual professionals of varied lineages, both ritual masters (*fashi*) and Daoist priests (*daoshi*), packed in their briefcases and backpacks, together with other ritual implements, liturgical manuals, and prepared talismans. Between ritual occasions, these whips also appear enshrined on temple altars, their thongs coiled into a round base, their serpent-headed handles pointed heavenward.

A material embodiment of the formidable serpent deity, the whip is renowned for its exorcistic potency, "a ritual implement of great power" (Dai 2007, 34). When put into ritual action, the whip often finds use in liturgical sequences intended to establish the sacred space for a ritual occasion (*kaitan*, lit. "opening the altar"), to render the space "pure and clean" (*qingjing*). A ritual master of the Penghu Pu'an tradition, for



Figure 1. After a two-day pilgrimage across Taiwan, Daoist priest Liu Zhangxiang faces a touring bus and uses the serpent-headed handle of his *jingbian* to write an invisible talisman, ensuring safe passage on the return trip. Photograph by Aaron K. Reich.

example, will begin rituals for animating deity statues by entering the altar space with his whip draped around his neck, serpent-headed handle in one hand, straw-rope tail in the other, performing a series of patterned steps, the rite of “Treading Upon the Stars of the Dipper” (*ta douxing*). He will then strike the ground with the whip several times; each time, he spins to face a new direction, sprays sacralized water from his mouth, and intones incantations: “With one strike, the Gate of Heaven opens. With a second strike, the Door of Earth cracks. With a third strike, the Gate of Humanity joins with life. With a fourth strike, the Path of Ghosts is annihilated” (Lü 2010, 39b). During temple processions, minor-rite troupes (*xiaofa tuan*) may carry with them a longer ritual whip more suitable for outdoor performances, with a larger handle and a thong eighteen or more feet in length.³ In temple courtyards, in front of large crowds, to the sound of hand drums and altar ballads, someone from the troupe will wield the long whip in spectacular fashion, striking the ground three times in succession, driving away malevolent spirits and calling upon subordinate spirit-soldiers to fall in line and stand ready for battle.

Aside from its capacity to generate a piercing clap when it strikes the ground, the ritual whip has other functions, several of which pertain to its serpent-headed handle. Ritual specialists may use it, for example, during small exorcisms (*shoujing*); in the course of the short ritual, performers may ask clients to huff a single breath of air toward the mouth of the serpent-headed handle, with hopes that the benevolent serpent god will devour their misfortunes (see Cao 2013, 54). On other occasions, a ritual performer may use the serpent-headed handle to write in the air invisible talismans meant to purify and protect a person, place, or vehicle (figure 1). At large-scale royal offerings (*wangjiao*), such as the triennial events in Xigang and Donggang, both great assemblies for the prevention of epidemics specifically and misfortune more broadly, the whip has a central place in the performance of exorcistic healing

rites called *jijie* (lit. “offering and resolution”). During the rite, ritual masters first ask families or groups of friends to stand side by side and hold the whip together, each person holding a part of the whip, from head to tail, stretched out horizontally. Bound together by the exorcistic whip, the group listens to the ritual master recite incantations for protection and healing as the short rite continues.⁴ Across varied lineage groups, these serpent-handled whips, each one a material manifestation of the serpent deity, often undergo consecrations, rituals of animation similar to those intended to enliven statues and paintings of the gods.

The ritual whip and its association with a protective serpent god have a long history in Taiwan and the Minnan littoral. Private collectors in Taiwan boast serpent-handled whips dating from the Qing period (1644–1912), either produced on the island or imported during waves of immigration from Fujian.⁵ In its basic function as a handheld instrument capable of generating a loud snapping sound, the purifying whip seems to have derived from court ritual procedures of the middle and late imperial periods. As part of an imperial procession, one or several “whip-sounding field officers” (*mingbian xiaowei*) would crack a whip three times, calling for order and silence among those in attendance. Most historical texts refer to these whips as “silencing whips” (*jingbian*), yet some texts use the cognate *jingbian*, “purifying whip” or “whip of purification,” one of several common terms for the contemporary ritual whip.⁶ The relationship between these whips of the imperial court and modern-day ritual whips finds its closest parallels in those ritual performances of minor rite troupes during temple processions. Conceived as the imperial guard of one or more gods, the troupe designates someone to use the purifying whip to strike the ground precisely three times in the temple courtyard, before the god’s palace (*gong*), a clear reenactment of the silencing whip from imperial times. By the late Qing, descriptions of these silencing whips in historical compendia also indicate physical and iconographical parallels with the ritual whip:

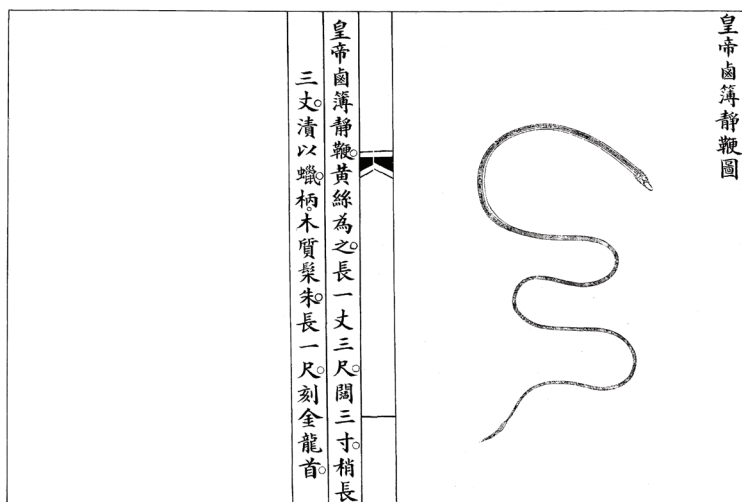


Figure 2. Illustration of a silencing whip and accompanying instructions.
Da Qing huidian tu, j.85.



Figure 3. From left to right, images of deities Chen Jinggu (photograph courtesy of Lin Mengyi), Pu'an (Lü 2010), and Fazhu gong (photograph by Aaron K. Reich).

Made of yellow silk, its length is [approximately] fourteen feet and its width [approximately] four inches; its tail extends [approximately] thirty-three feet and is coated in wax. Its handle is made from wood and is lacquered in vermilion; its length is [approximately] thirteen inches, with the carved head of a golden dragon (figure 2).⁷

While the carved handle of the modern ritual whip most often takes the form of a serpent or hybrid serpent-dragon, ritual professionals in the contemporary era may have a *jingbian* with a dragon-headed handle, reminiscent of the field officers of the Qing court.

Meanwhile, the *jingbian*'s status as an embodiment of a serpent deity has its roots in the lore of several deified ritual specialists whose cults have flourished in southeastern China for several centuries.⁸ As scholar and Daoist priest Cao Yuqi has discussed, these regions have humid weather and dense forests, ideal conditions for poisonous snakes to thrive, making life more dangerous for the populace (2013, 56). Throughout the middle and late imperial periods, cult practices emerged for the pacification of serpent demons, and local legends developed wherein powerful ritual specialists used their techniques to subdue and subordinate such serpent spirits. These historical ritual specialists, such as, for example, the Celestial Mistress Chen Jinggu (766–790), the Daoist Master Zhang Ciguan (1024–1069) and his disciples, and the Buddhist ritualist Pu'an Yinsu (1115–1169), posthumously became deities in southeast China and Taiwan.⁹ To this day, images of these gods often feature them holding a serpent or a serpent-handled whip, iconographical indications that these deities have in the past subjugated a serpent spirit and now can command its ritual power (see figure 3).

From the same time these hagiographies developed and circulated, ritual compendia still extant in the Ming Daoist canon (*Zhengtong Daozang*) make mention of powerful exorcistic gods who brandish golden whips (*jingbian*) as ritual weapons, Prime Marshal Zhao (Zhao yuanshuai) the most well-known among them. Several of these same ritual compendia feature one particular exorcistic god by the name

of Prime Marshal Ma (Ma yuanshuai), who in his iconographical descriptions enjoys the protective company of a subordinate deity named General White Snake (Baishe jiangjun). In a study of ritual traditions in Taiwan and their historical origins, Stephen Flanigan suggests that this latter deity may have come into being as a deified personification of the ritual whip; in other words, General White Snake could be an early expression of Saint Golden Whip, the serpent-whip deity now venerated throughout Taiwan and Minnan (2019, 71, 174). Although studies have not confirmed a direct link between the two deities, their corresponding iconographies and liturgical functions indeed seem to indicate General White Snake as a late-imperial precedent of the modern-day Saint Golden Whip.

From the earliest uses of the ritual whip to the present day, it would seem that ritual professionals first appropriated the silencing whip from imperial court ritual. Just as the silencing whip prepared both civil and military officials for an audience with the emperor, the ritual whip called into order subordinate spirits, readying them for their liturgical work. As time progressed, in southeast China, where cult practices surrounding serpent spirits and their subjugation proliferated, ritual whips took on a heightened status as material manifestation of subjugated serpent gods. To give visual expression to this divine status, and in close emulation of the silencing whips of court field officers, artists began to carve the handles of these ritual whips in the likeness of a serpent, a dragon, or a hybrid of the two. This had the effect of rendering the *jingbian* a ritual weapon and a divine image, a material embodiment of an immaterial apotropaic power. Over several centuries, as ritual specialists developed techniques for using the whip and circulated corresponding incantations, some of these individuals collaborated with local artists, or took on the role of artist themselves, generating designs and methods to carve the serpent-headed handle and to weave the straw-rope tail. Such artists had a pivotal role in the creation of the *jingbian* as a ritual implement and its maintenance as a cultural tradition. Yet, the stories of these artists, the carvers and the weavers, have largely been lost to history, their creative processes unrecorded and unknown.

To give expression to these artists and their stories, and to shed light on their creative processes, this article examines the making of a single *jingbian* in modern Taiwan. It details as a case study the ideas and techniques of two artists who collaborate in the production process: a carver who shapes from peach-tree wood the serpent-headed handle, and a weaver who braids from dried ramie fibers the serpent's straw-rope tail. In our modern age of mechanical reproduction, some ritual professionals, to save time and expense, may choose to purchase a factory-made ritual whip, either from a local shop of religious goods or from an online retailer. Yet, in the main, people in the business of ritual performance show a preference for *jingbian* that have been handcrafted. A hand-carved serpent-headed handle will tend to have more unique characteristics and look more impressive; a hand-woven straw-rope tail will make a louder and more beautiful sound when it strikes the ground. As regards its ritual potency, a handmade whip carries traces of its makers: the essence and spirit (*jingshen*) of its artists become forever infused in the wood and the rope, instilling the handmade whip with life and breath, a vitality no factory machine can replicate (Benjamin 2008).

This study explores how precisely the two artists generate this superior quality in their collaborative production of a *jingbian*. I argue that their artistic processes center around improvisations made in the space between inheritance and invention; for both components of the *jingbian*, head and tail, each respective artist relies on his creative faculties both to originate new cultural patterns and to maintain aspects of inherited tradition (Hughes-Freeland 2007). In forging their own novel ideas and inspiration, their own innovative designs and methods, the two artists reveal how traditions change over time. Never static concepts, traditions have a living vitality, taking on new forms and finding new expressions as they move forward from person to person, from one generation to the next (Silvio 2023).

In its analysis of the ways in which individual artists improvise in the maintenance of inherited cultural patterns and in the invention of new ones, this article draws inspiration from recent scholarship at the intersection of anthropology and material-culture studies. In the introduction to an edited volume on the topic of creativity and cultural improvisation, the book's editors express a sentiment that resonates closely with my thesis: "there is creativity," they write, "even and especially in the maintenance of an established tradition. . . . The continuity of tradition is due not to its passive inertia but to its active regeneration — in the tasks of *carrying on*" (Ingold and Hallam 2007, 5–6, emphasis original). The present article corroborates this claim through a concrete example, the making of a *jingbian*, highlighting the ways in which the two artists channel their creativity as they participate in the transmission of culture. In the early twenty-first century, scholars working in the field of material religion, both in East Asia and more broadly, have focused primarily on the use of material objects rather than on the artistic and ritual processes that bring them into being (Ingold 2013, 7). This study therefore aims to contribute not only to scholarship on material religion, but also to scholarship on the *making* of material religion. It details the ideas and techniques of two intersecting artistic worlds, the creative endeavors of two craftsmen, each one contributing in his own way to the "active regeneration" of the *jingbian*, among the most central ritual objects in Taiwan.

The two main sections to follow build upon ethnographic data collected primarily in the summer of 2021, both my observation of the two artists at work and over fifteen hours of recorded interviews. Regarded by their contemporaries as among the very best in their respective crafts, the two artists at the heart of this study live on opposite sides of the island: Lin Zhengda (b. 1975), the carver, resides in the eastern city of Taitung, and Huang Zhengxiang (b. 1985), the weaver, lives in the western city of Changhua. Both artists practice their craft primarily as an expression of personal interest and only secondarily as a means to supplement income. This study details the general approaches of the two artists, their histories, their ideas, and their techniques. It follows the story of a single *jingbian*—a collaboration of the two artists made for the author—from the initial selection of a peach-tree branch to the respective artistic processes of carving and weaving, and then to the ultimate consecration of the *jingbian* as a ritual implement. The final product of Lin and Huang's artistry, the ritual whip now serves as a material embodiment of their ideas and their practices, their spirits and their stories.



Figure 4. Lin Zhengda at his desk. Photograph still taken from Aaron K. Reich's field footage.

Carving: The many faces of Saint Golden Whip

Lin Zhengda spoke to me at the rear of his retail shop, the two of us seated together at the exact place where he carves his *jingbian* handles (colloquially *shengzhe*, lit. “saints”). He had several of them spread out on the desk’s surface, which he had brought from inside of his home for the occasion of our

interview (figure 4). “I prefer to make things that aren’t the same,” he said, “with more unique characteristics.”¹⁰ The seven *shengzhe* he had on display affirmed his preference for variety, their juxtaposition showcasing a breadth of sizes and designs, some finished works, others in nascent stages of development. Among them was the *shengzhe* he had made for me over the course of the last two years, presented to me just moments before, when I had arrived at his shop. In front of him, on his desk, an adjustable reading lamp illuminated his current work in progress: a *shengzhe* based on a Qing-dynasty original, a design for a close friend, a Daoist priest living across the island in Tainan. Next to the *shengzhe*, Lin had his orange-handled utility knife for carving and a painter’s brush for sweeping away bits of wood.

He explained his workflow, his process of carving several *shengzhe* at once, his way of deciding from one moment to the next where to aim his attention. “I’ll only go to work when I have inspiration,” he said, smiling, a warm shimmer in his eyes.¹¹ “If it’s a time when there’s no inspiration, then I won’t, I’ll just lay it aside. So, for your *shengzhe*, I had laid it aside, working on it over a longer time. Now and then I’d think of it and continue the carving. If I didn’t think of it, I’d do other things, [maybe I’d] first carve an initial shape [*chupei*, lit. ‘initial embryo’].”¹² As he spoke, he picked up a massive *shengzhe* from the corner of his desk, twice the size of all the others, a nascent handle still lacking in fine details. “When you don’t have inspiration for this one,” he said, pointing to another *shengzhe* on his desk, one in the final stages of carving, “then, you take another one,” holding up the very large *shengzhe*, “and carve the initial shape . . . this one I have been working on for the last several days.”¹³ For Lin, this first step in the design demands less of his creative imagination. “You just have to see the serpent, this appearance, its form, but when you have to add embellishments, and if you’re not doing that well, you can just set it aside. You wait for when you have inspiration and then go back to work. . . . When you’ve got inspiration, when you work, it’ll be smoother.”¹⁴ In crafting several whip handles at once, Lin lets his intuition guide him, some days designing the fine details of one handle, other days carving the basic shape of another, each *shengzhe* taking at least one year to complete from start to finish.

We continued talking in Lin’s atelier, at his large desk in the back corner of his family’s small retail shop, the artist’s primary source of income; he sells celebratory food items and paper materials intended for temple offerings. The first-floor facade

of their multi-story home, the shop faces the busy streets of central Taitung. On the top floor, Lin maintains an impressive domestic temple, replete with several altars and dozens of spirit images, a formal division of a Tainan temple called White Dragon Hut (Bailong an), the place where he first learned to perform minor rites many years ago. It was his original teacher of minor rites who encouraged him to carve *shengzhe*. “He told me to go get some peach wood, go carve; he told me to give it a try. And then I got more and more interested.”¹⁵ Nowadays, more than fifteen years after his teacher’s suggestion, Lin continues to hone his craft, still carving at his shop in his free time between customers. “This one doesn’t look very ferocious (*xiong*),” he said, showing me a photograph of a *shengzhe* from ten years ago. “It looks foolish, this face is foolish . . . not that scary, not that ferocious.”¹⁶ As an image of the mighty serpent god, a *shengzhe* should have a ferocious expression. In time, through his own creative discoveries, Lin would learn not only how to render the face more ferocious, but he would also formulate new patterns to give the serpent’s body a more menacing appearance.

At times, at the request of a friend or client, Lin might carve a copy of an earlier “old saint” (*lao shengzhe*), a whip handle from generations past, like the one he was carving for his priest friend when I arrived. At other times, he fashions brand new designs, new riffs on traditional patterns, his favorite part of the craft. “If you’re able to carve, you’ll definitely have your own flavor,” he said.¹⁷ During his fifteen years carving *shengzhe*, Lin has developed several varieties of baseline body shapes and special features, and he combines these in novel ways to render each *shengzhe* a unique creation, different from any other. At the time of our meeting in 2021, he had developed three baseline shapes for the serpentine body: winding (*wanqu*), straight (*tongtian*, lit. “joining with Heaven”), and spiraled (*panxuan*). Lin can design *shengzhe* in these three shapes in any size, depending upon the preferences of his clients. For the surface pattern of these bodies, he has most often accorded with tradition, carving scales (*linpian*) around the serpent’s back and sides. But more recently, he has pioneered a new design, a flowing mane (*zongmao*) that covers the back and sides of the serpent. He used this design for this article’s *shengzhe*, more challenging to carve than the traditional scales. When devising this pattern, Lin drew inspiration from the four-character expression *shengmao daijiao*, literally “to grow hair and bear horns,” a phrase that describes a person or thing with a monstrous appearance. “It means ferocious and fierce,” Lin explained, “people see it and they’ll feel afraid, it’s like this person is especially formidable, with a very ferocious and fierce appearance.”¹⁸ For an image of the serpent god, invariably intended to protect devotees from malevolent forces, the more formidable its appearance, the more efficacious its function (Kendall and Ariati 2020).

Among those few *shengzhe* that Lin has designed with the mane pattern, one stands out to him as an exemplar of his artistic style, a two-headed (*shuangtou*) *shengzhe* that he made for a client in Malaysia, the first time he carved the mane pattern instead of the usual serpent scales. Completed in March of 2020, this two-headed *shengzhe* is one of only five two-headed handles he has made to date, a rare design in Taiwan, seldom seen in the oeuvre of other *shengzhe* artists. Lin carved his first two-headed *shengzhe* in response to a suggestion from his priest friend, who had an old two-

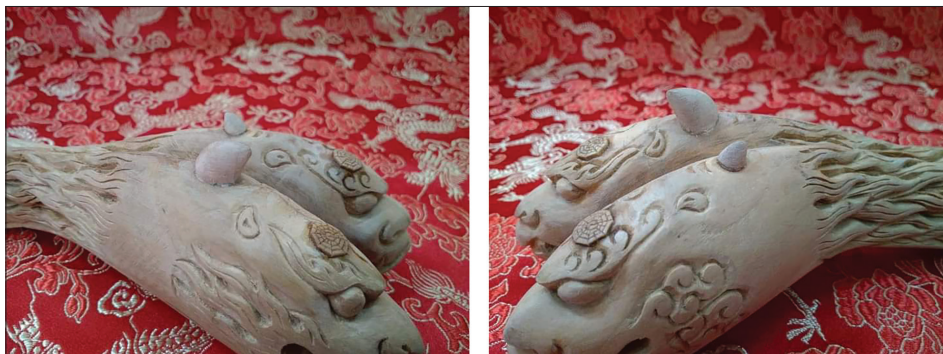


Figure 5. Detail of two-headed *shengzhe*. Photographs courtesy of Lin Zhengda.

headed *shengzhe* in his personal collection. It was on their first acquaintance, when the priest went to Taitung to assist in the performance of a large-scale ritual event. “We had a *jiao* [offering] in 2010 . . . at the Palace of the Celestial Empress [in Taitung] . . . before that time I had already been carving *shengzhe*. He asked me whether I had ever carved a two-headed one. I said I’ll give it a try, I’ll try carving one and see.”¹⁹ Nearly ten years later, when Lin was making the two-headed *shengzhe* for his client in Malaysia, he had carved several of these two-headed *shengzhe*, and by this later time had developed new ideas for his design.

Not only would the latest two-headed *shengzhe* have a flowing mane body pattern, but he would carve each of the two heads to have its own unique look, forging new and creative ways to render the original design he inherited from his priest friend. On his cell phone, Lin talked me through a few photographs of the Malaysia *shengzhe*. “The lips on this side come to a point, and on this side, it’s like this,” he said, making an underbite with his jaw.²⁰ One side had the traditional fire-gill (*huosai*) design on its cheeks, flames running along both sides; the other had a cloud pattern in the same place (figure 5). In shaping the signature single horn (*dujiao*) of the two heads, Lin made one large and the other small. He also changed how each head presented the Eight Trigrams (*bagua*), a standard component of most *shengzhe*, an octagonal-shaped design located on the serpent’s forehead. For his single-headed *shengzhe*, Lin uses a *bagua* pattern known as Posterior Heaven (*houtian*), a pattern that corresponds with the phenomenal world, the created world, the world of local gods and human beings and the ritual methods that join them. For this two-headed *shengzhe*, he used the standard *houtian* pattern for one head and the *qiantian* pattern for the other, the pattern of Anterior Heaven, synonymous with the uncreated and unformed reality of the Way itself.

According to the testimonial of his client in Malaysia, Lin’s two-headed *shengzhe* design has proven to have enhanced ritual efficacy. “About my friend in Malaysia . . . he told me about a young girl who was trapped by an underworld [spirit]. . . . He went to handle it, and the first time he used an average *shengzhe* to drive it away, but it didn’t work. Afterward, he took the two-headed one, the one I made for him . . . and used it to drive away [the shade], and the shade [*hun*] scattered, it dispersed and scattered.”²¹ Aside from the two serpent heads of this *shengzhe*, other properties of Lin’s whip handle may have contributed to its ritual potency, namely his use of two types of wood with apotropaic properties, peach wood (*taomu*) and willow wood

(*liumu*). Many years ago, a ritual master in the central city of Taichung suggested to Lin that, as a way to make his *shengzhe* more formidable, he could embed (*ru*) willow wood to form the seven-star pattern under the serpent's chin. Along with the single horn, the Eight Trigrams, and the fire gills, the seven-star pattern is another common iconographical feature of most *shengzhe*. Seven small circles connected by curving lines, the pattern represents the Northern Dipper and its apotropaic power. Lin followed this advice and later developed further methods of his own, using willow wood not only for the seven stars but also for the single horn and the Eight Trigrams.

In our conversations at Lin's desk, he stressed that this method of embedding a second type of wood is unique to him, his own contribution to how the *jingbian* looks and functions. "In traditions from earlier times there wasn't anyone doing it like this. . . . It was me who started embedding willow wood, and it's likely there aren't others. I haven't seen any others, and looking at old *shengzhe*, I haven't seen anyone use the embedding [method] . . . it's likely my own distinguishing characteristic."²² In some cases, Lin reverses the two kinds of wood, using willow wood for the main body and peach wood for the embedded details. "If your [*shengzhe*] is peach wood, then I'll embed willow wood. If your [*shengzhe*] is willow wood, then I'll embed peach wood."²³ In either scenario, the use of two types of apotropaic wood not only gives his *shengzhe* a unique quality, but it also contributes to the perceived ritual efficacy of the finished whip, its capacity to trounce disaster and disease, to bolster peace and prosperity. In response to requests from one client, Lin may embed incense ashes from a temple altar into the head of a *shengzhe*, placed underneath the Eight Trigrams, a practice usually reserved for deity statues. As another example of Lin's proclivity for unique characteristics, for at least two of the *shengzhe* in his oeuvre, he replaced his standard carving of the two polarities at the center of the Eight Trigrams with a small movable marble.

It was July 21, 2019, when I first met Lin in Taitung.²⁴ After greeting me downstairs in his shop, he brought me upstairs to his domestic temple space in the top floor of his home. He brought from a corner a white plastic bucket containing several branches of peach wood and helped me to select a branch that would become my own *shengzhe*. As I later learned from our interview sessions in 2021, Lin had already treated those branches for more than a year. First, he soaks the branches in water for eight months and then dries them for another two months. This helps prevent excessive cracking in the peach wood when he carves. "This allows the fluid from the wood to seep, otherwise [the wood] will crack."²⁵ Lin changes the water every two or three days, because the fluid from the peach wood emits an unpleasant odor at first. When beginning to work with peach wood, he had no knowledge of this process. He would bring home peach branches and start carving right away, and each time, the branch would crack. Then, a ritual master in Tainan suggested he soak the branches in water. On his own, Lin intuited that he should soak the wood until it no longer emits an odor, which, as he discovered, takes about eight months. After the initial water soak and subsequent drying time, he then soaks the branches in diesel oil for another two or three months and finally dries the branches for another two months. The diesel oil, he says, protects the wood against insects. "If you don't soak the wood [in diesel], then termites will get in . . . and you'll have a bunch of holes [in the wood]."²⁶ For each

of these treatment processes, Lin learned his own methods over time as he became more adept at working with peach wood as a medium.

Even before Lin started the long treatment process for the branch that would become this article's *shengzhe*, he acquired the branch from a peach tree at a local peach farm, one of several branches he collected that day, sawing the branches from the tree with an impromptu ritual dedicated to the natural world and its spirits. "When I remove [the wood], I'll tie on a red cloth," he told me.²⁷ "I'll pray, I'll have a few words with the mountain, with the earth. To the earth god and the mountain spirits, to the tree spirit, you'll speak with them. If this tree has a spirit, has a tree soul, then you'll speak with it, saying that today we're going to take [these branches]. These will be used as Daoist ritual implements, so we'll express our deference."²⁸ Each time Lin goes to gather branches, his unscripted prayers infuse his artistic practice with religious sentiment from the outset. Always speaking from his heart, he performs his own ritual acts and utterances, carrying on an inherited tradition in his own way. Shortly after our first meeting in July 2019, Lin took the branch he helped me to select and used a black marker to sketch the outline of the serpent's head and upper body, tracing the handle of the ritual whip (figure 6). His drawing followed the natural contours of the wood, providing a preliminary vision for what would become a *shengzhe* of the winding type, the most common of Lin's three baseline shapes.

On July 22, 2019, the day following our first meeting, Lin started carving this article's *shengzhe*, initiating the artistic process with another alternative version of a traditional carver's ritual, a short ritual called the *kaifu*, the ritual of "Opening with the Hatchet." Each time he performs this ritual, he sits low to the floor, often seated on an upside-down bucket, and he places the branch in front of him. He burns incense and intones an incantation, a formula he learned from a close friend in the business of ritual, akin to those incantations that statue carvers recite during their respective *kaifu* performances (Lin 2015, 36–38).²⁹

Aromas of incense flourish, responding to Heaven and Earth.

Lighting pure incense, it makes its way through Heaven's Gate.

Golden birds rush like arrows of clouds.

The Jade Hare (i.e., the moon) shines like a wheel.

I humbly invite and call respectfully upon Saint Golden Whip.

Soar swiftly upward, ride the mists, descend, and arrive here!

With my whole heart focused, I humbly invite him.

I humbly invite Saint Golden Whip and acknowledge his divinity.

Today I perform the *kaifu* for the Golden Body.

The god is here as I carve, carve the divine form.

You reside above it, manifesting your divine might and presence.

The god is here, the god is here.

May this *kaifu* have great good fortune and splendor.

By imperial decree, may it open,

Spirit soldiers, spirit generals, swift as fire, as the law commands.



Figure 6. Outline of this article's *shengzhe* in marker on a branch of peach wood. Photograph courtesy of Lin Zhengda.

For statue carvers in Taiwan, and for Lin, the *kai fu* functions as an opening ceremony, announcing to the relevant gods that the carving of a new image will soon begin. After he intones the formula, rather than perform the central ritual gestures with a traditional hatchet, as statue carvers do, Lin uses a chisel, another instance of his liturgical improvisation. "Others use a hatchet . . . [I perform] 'Opening with the Hatchet' with a chisel, simply my own tool, that's it."³⁰ And whereas statue carvers most often strike the uncarved block of wood five times, Lin uses only three ceremonial strikes with the hammer and chisel. For Lin, the number five refers to the four limbs and head of an anthropomorphic deity. Meanwhile, the number three corresponds to the serpentine body: head, body, and tail. "I'll do three times . . . just three times like this. Because a serpent is not [something that] has a head and limbs. I'll just do three times like this and that's it."³¹ In Lin's performance of the *kai fu* for his *shengzhe*, he exemplifies once more how he not only improvises in the various stages of artistic production, but also in the short ritual performances that punctuate the production process, acts and utterances that infuse his craft with religious sentiment and personal meaning (Andersen 2001).

On July 26, several days after his performance of the *kai fu*, Lin once more found time to continue his work on this article's *shengzhe*. He returned to his seat on the upside-down bucket and began to carve the serpent's initial shape, the first step in the actual artistic process. Akin to the short rituals that precede this step, Lin's method of carving the initial shape illustrates how he adapts to his materials, to his workspace, and to the tools he has at his disposal, in the continuation of cultural patterns. Seated low to the ground on the upside-down bucket, Lin pressed his sneakers tightly together to hold the marked branch in place. Then, holding the branch steady with his feet, he used his hammer and chisel and an ox-horn carpenter's plane (*niujiao bao*) to remove bark and excess wood. He continued this work at a steady pace for around

three weeks, carving only when inspiration struck. By August 18, he had whittled the peach branch to reveal the nascent whip handle, ten inches in length and around two inches in diameter, its form an undulating line from top to bottom, the rudimentary shape of the serpent god. He sanded the wood smooth, and on the flat plane that forms the serpent's belly, he marked my name, distinguishing this *shengzhe* from his other works in progress (figure 7). During this first step of the process, the carving of the initial shape, the *shengzhe* developed a crack along the right side of its face, a scar that endures to this day, still visible in the *shengzhe*'s final form. To repair the crack when it occurred, Lin simply used superglue, another of the many self-taught techniques he has invented along the way. An artist without formal training in the art of carving, Lin had no teacher to explain these methods to him, to suggest to him to sketch an outline with a black marker, to sit low to the floor and use his feet to stabilize the branch as he worked. Rather, Lin develops these techniques. He used his intuition, and his ingenuity, and through a long process of trial and error, he has devised his own way to carve the initial shape of the serpent-headed whip handle, the quintessential visual form of this inherited artistic tradition.

Several months later, on November 28, 2019, Lin started to carve the *shengzhe*'s facial section (*lianbu*), the second phase of any *shengzhe* that he makes, another occasion that shows how he develops new methods in the maintenance of inherited iconographical patterns. After he carves and sands the initial shape of the new *shengzhe*, Lin always proceeds in an order he regards as the traditional standard operating procedure: facial section, back and sides, belly, and lastly, the final details of the face and head. In carving the facial section of Saint Golden Whip, or of any spirit image broadly speaking, artists in the main hold that symmetry is paramount. To ensure symmetry, Lin first used a pencil to draw a vertical centerline over the top of the head and down to the nose. He then used a ruler to measure the centerline to the place he would carve each eye, making certain to maintain an equal distance on both sides. He used his utility knife to carve the nascent shape of the eyes, removing excess wood from under, above, and around each eye to create a low relief. He carved a light line in an upward slant from each eye, the basis of what would become the eyebrows. He measured and carved a prominent brow ridge between the two eyes. To maintain symmetry of the *shengzhe*'s nose, Lin folded in half a small white piece of paper, used a pencil to draw one half of the design, and then used his utility knife to cut both



Figure 7. Completed initial shape. Photographs courtesy of Lin Zhengda.



Figure 8. Beginning of the flowing mane pattern. Photographs courtesy of Lin Zhengda.



Figure 9. Lin carves the *shengzhe*'s belly. Photographs courtesy of Lin Zhengda.

halves of the folded paper, resulting in a shape with perfect symmetry. Lin used a temporary adhesive to paste the white paper in place and then traced the outline with a pencil. “If you just draw [the nose], there’s no way to make it symmetrical . . . in the past I’d just draw [the nose],” he said, shaking his head and smiling. He pointed to the two sides of the nose. “[On] my earliest [*shengzhe*] . . . here and here would be different. If you just draw, there’s no way to make it the same, no way to make it symmetrical, the two sides will be different.”³² In an effort to adhere to an inherited artistic convention, Lin developed his own methods to render his *shengzhe* with perfect facial symmetry. Once more, through a process of trial and error, he taught himself effective techniques to keep his craft in accordance with tradition; he improvised in the maintenance of cultural standards. With the nose in place, Lin used a ruler and pencil to make symmetrical the two sides of the serpent’s mouth. He then used his utility knife and an electric drill to complete the carving of the mouth.

On February 13, 2020, just as the Spring Festival had come to a close, Lin started to carve the exterior of the *shengzhe*'s body, its back and sides, using the flowing

mane pattern he had developed in years prior, a design unique to his own artistic tradition. By way of personal correspondence, he explained this step of his process. “For the body of your Saint Golden Whip, I’m not carving scales. I’m going to carve a mane, long hair on its body . . . ‘To grow hair and have horns’ is the appearance of a demonic monster, a metaphor for an especially hideous or formidable being.”³³ This *shengzhe*, he further explained, would become one of only three *shengzhe* he had made with the flowing mane pattern on its body. In carving the mane design, Lin first used a pencil to sketch wisps of hair on the serpent’s back and sides (figure 8). He then used his utility knife to carve away excess wood, creating the mane pattern in low relief. He later added lines over the entire body, giving further visual expression to the flowing mane appearance. A few months later, in April, after he had finished the flowing mane, he turned to the belly section (*fubu*). As he had done when carving the mane, Lin first used a pencil to sketch the lines of the serpent’s ventral scales, horizontal undulating lines in rows, running along the underside of the *shengzhe*, from under its chin all the way to the base (figure 9). With the rough outline in place, he used his utility knife to render the scales in low relief. In its final expression, the exterior design of the *shengzhe*’s body exemplifies Lin’s creative process: he follows his own intuition and uses his own tools and methods both to pioneer unprecedented variations and to give form to inherited iconographical components.

One month later, in May 2020, Lin had finished carving the body and returned to the facial section to render the final details of the *shengzhe*. In this final phase, the artist once more gives creative expression to traditional iconographical conventions. In place of the usual fire gills (*huosai*) common to many hybrid half-serpent, half-dragon designs, Lin rendered the gills of this article’s *shengzhe* in an aquatic fashion, each set resembling the fins of a fish, the first time he had ever tried this variation (figure 10). Soon afterward, he let the *shengzhe* rest for nearly one full year, not returning to the project until March 2021, when he was ready for the finishing touches, most of them iconographical elements on the *shengzhe*’s head and face: the Eight Trigrams, the seven-star pattern, and the iconic single horn. First, with a small chisel, he removed wood from the top of the head in the shape of an octagon, creating a space to insert a small piece of willow wood. As he had done earlier with the serpent’s nose, Lin used his folded-paper method to create a design with perfect symmetry. Once he had embedded the willow wood in the top of the serpent’s head, Lin carved on the willow an Eight-Trigram design, his expression of a conventional iconographical element. Next, he turned to the bottom side of the serpent’s head, underneath its chin, and used an electric drill to make seven small holes. One by one, Lin placed into each hole a sharpened piece of willow wood and fortified the connection with superglue. He used a small hand saw to remove the excess willow wood and then sanded the remaining willow, forming seven small beads, which he then connected with gently sloping lines to form a constellation pattern, the seven stars of the Big Dipper. For the *shengzhe*’s single horn, Lin removed another small section of wood from the top of the head, just behind the Eight Trigrams. He then inserted a piece of willow wood, carved to a point; he adhered the willow in place and then carved and sanded it, the one horn of the winged serpent. Lastly, Lin carved his signature on the belly of the *shengzhe* near its base, a line of ten characters descending over ten respective rows of



Figure 10. Fish gills (front) compared to standard fire gills (rear). Photograph courtesy of Lin Zhengda.



Figure 11. Completed *shengzhe*. Photographs courtesy of Lin Zhengda.

ventral scales: “Respectfully carved by Mountain-Forest Crafts of Taitung, Taiwan” (figure 11).

To this day, Lin Zhengda continues to carve *shengzhe* for clients and friends, always working on several projects at once, taking his time, only picking up the utility knife when inspiration strikes (figure 12). Despite the fine quality and unique characteristics of his finished works, Lin never claims to have any special talent. Instead, he insists his craft is only a hobby, not a profession. Over the course of more than fifteen years, he has selected his own tools and developed his own methods, learning not from a



Figure 12. Lin poses with one of his completed *shengzhe* at a temple in Tainan.
Photograph courtesy of Lin Zhengda.

Figure 13. Huang Zhengxiang. Photograph
courtesy of Huang Zhengxiang.



formal teacher, but from the close study of old *shengzhe*, formulating techniques to recreate them in his own way. At the same time, Lin has pioneered new designs and novel iconographical elements, drawing upon his creative imagination to give unique expression to the many faces of Saint Golden Whip, the winged serpent god, vanquisher of demons. As our week together came to an end, we drove separate scooters to the Palace of the Celestial Empress, the large Mazu temple where he works. He introduced me to the temple's history and to the gods enshrined on its altars. As afternoon turned to evening, under the mist of a light rain, I thanked him, said goodbye, and headed back to the train station, soon to make my way to the other side of the island, to Changhua, to find a man I had never met in person: Huang Zhengxiang, the Snake Master.

At the time of our meeting in 2021, Lin, too, had never met Huang in person. Rather, the two artists became acquainted and began to correspond on social media. As Lin reached the final stages of carving this article's *shengzhe*, he suggested to me that I ask Huang to weave the straw-rope tail. According to Lin, Huang could



Figure 14. Huang purifies the *shengzhe* with incense. Photograph still from Aaron K. Reich's field footage.

render his designs thin and flat, especially suitable for a thong of around nine feet, an ideal match for the *shengzhe* Lin had made for me. At the time of this writing in 2023, Lin continues to recommend Huang to many of his clients. For clients who prefer a thick and round whip design, Lin may instead put them in touch with another weaver, his close friend in Tainan, the Daoist priest mentioned earlier. Meanwhile, in Changhua, Huang Zhengxiang weaves whips for clients from all over the island. An artist of considerable renown, the weaver has a waiting list of more than three years.

Weaving: Secrets of the Snake Master

Huang Zhengxiang lifted a ritual whip from his central desk (figure 13). “Here, I’ll give you a listen,” he said. He stood on the opposite side of his small office space and unraveled the coiled whip. His right hand wrapped around the carved serpent’s head, he slowly raised his arm to an almost horizontal position, dragging the thong across the floor. With a fast downward swing of his arm, he cracked the whip on the floor. A sound like a gunshot rang out in the small room. My ears started ringing. “Most others don’t understand the proper weaving technique,” he said. “Their whips won’t be able to make this kind of sound. . . . Do you have your *shengzhe*?” he asked, setting his whip aside. I removed Lin’s carving from my backpack and handed it to him. He unwrapped it and had a look. I expected him in that moment to pause to admire the artistry, the quality of the carving, the unique details. But his attention went immediately to the bottom of the carving, to the place where his woven thong, once finished, would attach to the handle (refer to figure 11). He furrowed his brow. “He always makes them like this,” he said, shaking his head. Huang pointed to the small dowel protruding from the base, the intended point of attachment, about one inch long, about the same diameter as a penny. “This won’t hold well,” he said. “There’s nothing for it to hold on to. As you use it, as you’re striking with it, the woven part will eventually fly off. What you need is this,” he said, picking up another whip handle from his desk, a carving from another artist. He pointed to its base. The attachment

point had the same diameter as the whip handle itself, much larger than Lin's dowel design. A single carved line about one inch from the bottom of the base circumscribed the handle. "The woven tail can grab on to this," Huang said, demonstrating with a grabbing claw motion of his hand. "With this, the woven part won't fly off." "Is there a way . . .," I started to ask. "I have a way," he said, "but it's a secret. You can watch, but you can't take pictures."³⁴

Over the course of the next ninety minutes, Huang showed me his secret technique, one of several confidential methods he would disclose to me during our week together, each one an example of how the artist improvises in both the maintenance and reinvention of cultural conventions. "Most people who carve *shengzhe* don't do the weaving, so they just make them like this," he told me, referring to Lin's attachment point. "You've got to modify them to make them beautiful."³⁵ As he started to work, he prepared some incense in the small incense burner on his work desk. As the incense started to burn, Huang took Lin's *shengzhe* and moved it slowly over the white wisps of fragrant smoke, rotating it in a circular motion, purifying and protecting the whip handle, a ritual gesture that initiates his artistic process (figure 14). "My custom is, a new *shengzhe*, when it arrives, another master worker may have touched it, this kind of thing, so I'll first purify it. Only after I've purified [it and] my space will I then proceed. This also makes me more inspired."³⁶ His technique for modifying the attachment point involved the use of several small dowels, incense powder, and quick-drying glue to widen the original design of Lin's attachment point. When he was finished, the *shengzhe*'s attachment point took on a new appearance, approximating the look and feel of the other handle he had shown me. With the handle now modified, the next day he would start weaving the actual whip. "When you come tomorrow, I'll use the method of weaving that [the serpent god] showed me. That method of weaving is super strong."³⁷

When Huang started in this traditional art form more than nine years ago, he, like Lin, had no formal teacher. Rather, Huang first took an interest in ritual whips as a student of minor rites, another parallel with Lin's personal history. "At first I was always going to Tainan to study red-headed minor rites," he explained (Flanigan 2019). "Later, I noticed that the use of the ritual rope in Tainan minor rites was quite prevalent, as every one of their temples had probably one, two, or three of them, or even more. And so I thought, this is also a path in the study of ritual, a course subject. . . . And so, I went to buy [some], brought some back from China, undid the weaving . . . gradually put them back together, and gradually came to an understanding."³⁸ But his mastery of the craft would involve much trial and error, as well as divine intervention. "Tainan's older generation told me that only a thick [whip] will be loud. But Saint [Golden Whip] told me that's not the case. Thin [whips] will be loud, it's only a matter of how to weave them. . . . So, I tried [to weave] thin whips." Huang smiled. "My first whip and second whip were both failures. I gave up. But he [the serpent god] came to find me again, he told me to continue weaving, because I had an inspiration. And so, I continued to weave, weaving thin [whips], and the more I wove, the better I got."³⁹ As he persisted in the craft, Huang began to earn a reputation for the superior quality of his work. He adopted a trade sobriquet, the Snake Master, Wanshe daren



Figure 15. Two Snake Master logos. Photographs courtesy of Huang Zhengxiang.

(lit., “the Master who Plays with Snakes,” figure 15), which now doubles as his brand name on social media (Lin 2018; Chi 2018).

More than nine years later, Huang understands his craft as a calling, a certain duty to transmit his style of weaving to the next generation. “This really is just a service for Saint [Golden Whip],” he told me. “I’ve thought, if I give up this craft, stop weaving . . . who’s going to weave these *shengzhe*? . . . This must be a mission. . . . If I give up, if I stop weaving, will Taiwan still have *shengzhe* this loud? Maybe not.”⁴⁰ In Huang’s assessment, most other artists weave their whips thick and loose, round and soft, and the result is an inferior sound. His method, by contrast, renders his whips thin and tight, flat and hard, a design especially capable of generating a deafening cracking sound. One of his whips, he told me, is so loud that it once shattered someone’s ear drums. “That one can bite people,” he said. “It once bit someone’s ear off, seven stitches, even shattered the ear drum.”⁴¹ For a ritual whip to have a masterful quality, in Huang’s view, not only must it have a beautiful appearance, but it also should have considerable resonance: the *jingbian* is an instrument of sacred sound (Nitzky 2022). For that reason, despite the potential danger the crack of the whip imposes on the ears, Huang does not recommend using ear plugs. “If you use ear plugs, you won’t be able to make out its sound; it won’t have resonance. You’ve got to hear it directly for it [to have resonance].”⁴²

In recounting his artistic development, Huang describes his creative discoveries as divine revelations, direct transmissions from the serpent god. “I’m always changing,” Huang said. After studying the patterns of older whips from Taiwan and China, he started to modify his weaving technique in accord with each new whip. “Every whip is different,” he continued. “At first, I might take up a *shengzhe* and I might decide I’ll weave it this way. But when I’m in the process of weaving, the inspiration it gives me may not be the same.”⁴³ Never rigid in his technique, Huang adapts to the specific materials and circumstances of each new whip, consciously opening himself up to what inspirations might arise. I asked whether his inspirations come during dreams or in the daytime. “Both,” he said, “I’ll have both. Dreams happen less often, but inspirations that come directly from him [the serpent god] are more common.

When he comes it feels like a lightning flash, a fleeting insight that informs you.”⁴⁴ Among the insights Huang has received over the years, one vision inspired him to perfect a complex pattern of weaving called “eel bone” (*shanyu gu*), a method from old Tainan that very few artists can replicate. Through his study of older ritual whips and his own process of trial and error, Huang has also mastered a variation popular on the archipelago of Penghu called the “Seven Star Tail” (*qixing wei*): six smaller tails of several inches each extend from the central tail, three on each side. When Huang weaves these specialty patterns, he never strays from the signature method he understands as having been revealed to him, an inspiration from the serpent god, a method of weaving that renders Huang’s whips flat and hard, fastened solid (*zashi*), impressive to the eye, and piercing to the ear.

Aside from his renown in the traditional art of weaving, Huang has also earned local fame for his ability to crack the ritual whip, to generate thunderous sound with each strike. “Lots of people in Taiwan ask me to teach them how to crack [the whip], but I really don’t have time,” he told me.⁴⁵ As a master of wielding the *jingbian*, Huang has developed his own take on its function as a ritual weapon. “What kind of ritual implement do you think the *shengzhe* is?” he asked me. I told him my understanding, what I had learned from my time with Lin and from my interviews with ritual specialists. “It’s a ritual implement for driving away malevolent influences,” I said. “It can also summon spirit soldiers, get them to come to you.” “Right,” Huang said. “These two points are correct. Let me tell you, this thing, I call it a gun. Why a gun, do you know? When facing bad guys, we’ll have to attack them, this is driving away malevolent influences. Attacking them, using a gun to shoot and kill them. Then why when we summon deities might we use this thing? It’s like firing shots into the air, like a gun salute, like a national gun salute, welcoming dignitaries.”⁴⁶ Huang continued. “When you use it, there’s a blast, it feels like a gunshot, isn’t that like a gun? When it’s coiled up over there, when the gun’s placed over there, it won’t hurt anyone, it won’t kill anyone, right? [But] when you take it out and use it, it could hurt someone. Isn’t it the same as a gun?”⁴⁷

Huang extends his firearm analogy to his interpretation of the *shengzhe*’s conventional iconographical features, the Eight Trigrams and the Seven Stars, designs that appear on the top of the serpent’s head and the area underneath its chin, respectively. Whereas many ritual professionals with whom I have spoken understand these features to enhance the apotropaic efficacy of the ritual whip, Huang likens them to the safety on a gun: they ensure the serpent god does not become unwieldy. “It’s a ferocious entity, so we’ll use the Eight Trigrams and the Seven Stars to contain it, like the safety on a gun. We’re not using it now, so the safety keeps it locked up. When we want to use it, we unlock it. So, that’s why there’s the Eight Trigrams and Seven Stars, they contain it from above and below; otherwise, we couldn’t control it.”⁴⁸ Like the serpent demons that Chen Jinggu and other past ritual masters had to subdue, and similar to most exorcistic deities in the Daoist pantheon, Saint Golden Whip, in Huang’s view, may become unruly without the proper ritual restraints (Mozina 2021).

Huang’s work and living arrangement have much in common with Lin Zhengda’s; like the carver from Taitung, Huang views his artistic practice as a calling, a service

to the gods, not as a primary source of income. Rather, he and his family own and operate two adjacent small shops: one sells mung-bean tea during the daytime, the other, grilled meats and vegetables in the evenings. Together with his wife, his children, and his extended family, Huang lives in the rear side of the same building, opposite the two shops facing the busy streets of Changhua. Behind their residence, a local temple marks the place where Huang first became introduced to the religious culture. During an average workday, Huang weaves in his free time, between helping customers and handling maintenance tasks for the two shops. He weaves in a private studio space connected to the tea shop, where he keeps the tools of his trade, and, in a glass-door cabinet, a large collection of ritual whips and serpent-headed handles. As he works on his ritual whips, he can keep an eye on the tea shop through a large glass window that divides his office from the shop. When the shop gets a sudden rush of customers, he places a clip on the braided strands of ramie to hold them in place and steps into the shop to offer a hand. “This method of weaving is very slow,” he told me, “it doesn’t make any money. . . . In an hour, if I weave one *chi* [approximately one foot], that’s \$600 [NTD]. If in an hour I don’t even weave one *chi*, how can I make money? Besides,” he added, “my hands hurt, and I even need medical treatment,” he said, referring to pain in his neck and back, chronic ailments resulting from the physical demands of his craft.⁴⁹ Despite the physical pain and the lack of financial reward, Huang continues to weave for friends and clients, always in accordance with his own very high standards, taking his time, serving the gods.

On June 11, 2021, Huang began weaving the thong of this article’s *shengzhe*, a creative process that unfolded over several days, some parts disclosed to me in full detail, other parts remaining trade secrets of the Snake Master. When he started the work, Huang once more received a revelation from the serpent god, instructions detailing the specific parameters for the design. “Initially I had thought to use nine strands to weave. But the sense that Saint [Golden Whip] gave me was that he wants me to bring back the original tradition of Taiwan: to weave with seven strands, representing the Seven Stars.”⁵⁰ He cited a ritual incantation. “When you’re using this,” he said, “there’s an incantation: ‘he moves through the guideline, paces the Dipper, and treads over the Seven Stars.’”⁵¹ Common to disparate ritual lineages in Taiwan, the seven characters Huang cited form the second part of a couplet that praises the exorcistic power of Saint Golden Whip and describes his movement through the world: “Saint Golden Whip appears and demonic spirits startle,” the first line reads.⁵² In Huang’s view, to weave with seven strands has particular significance: it strengthens the bridge between the ritual whip and the apotropaic power of the Big Dipper; at the same time, the seven-strand method pays homage to the earliest traditions of weaving in Taiwan. “Later,” Huang continued, “as people continued to weave and made larger whips, they’d weave using nine strands, or even eleven strands.”⁵³ In choosing to use seven strands, Huang made his decision in the spur of the moment, “a fleeting insight” that the artist experiences as a transmission from the serpent god.

When I arrived at Huang’s studio that day, he had already started on the thong, first weaving the small basket at the head of the tail, the part that would later connect to the attachment point of the handle, which he had modified the previous day. He

did this first step before my arrival because he maintains his techniques for creating the woven basket as absolute secrets, as well as the exact methods he uses to join the woven basket to the attachment point of the carved handle. By the time I arrived, he had made nearly one *chi* of his signature flat braid; seven strands hung from the bottom, each strand comprised of a small bunch of ramie threads. The aroma of incense filled the air, the effect of a personal ritual that precedes all of Huang's weaving sessions. "I always light [incense] before I begin weaving," he told me. "It's my personal custom . . . the incense gives me a sense of calm."⁵⁴ As he worked, the thong hung from the horizontal beam on the metal H-frame rack he had designed. Large metal clips kept the thong attached to the rack; to protect the thong, Huang wrapped the area of finished braid in a thick gauze material before attaching the clips. With the thong firmly attached to the rack, and the rack weighted down with heavy tin cans, Huang used his full body weight to pull and twist each of the strands as he worked, forming one braid after another. "I've seen some people weave while sitting on the ground," he said, "but they don't exert any force. We've got to stand to exert force."⁵⁵ As Huang formed each new braid, he pulled hard with his arms, pressed hard with his fingers, the metal rack creaking in response to his body weight (Ingold 2013, 23). When he needed more leverage, he would lift his leg to a near horizontal position and press his foot against the rack, pushing forward with his foot, pulling backward with his hands (figure 16). "When I weave, it's like I'm pouring my life into it," he said. "For each thread, I tug and adjust . . . it's a technique."⁵⁶ Through a combination of strength and grace, intention and intuition, Huang rendered the chaotic mess of ramie fibers into a beautiful flat braid, one *chi* at a time, gradually tapering the number of strands from seven down to three.

After several days of observation and interviews, I left Changhua for about two weeks, returning on June 26 to watch the final step in Huang's process, the attachment of a "plastic tail" (*sujiao wei*), a thin strip of pink plastic extending from



Figure 16. Huang weaving. Photograph courtesy of Huang Zhengxiang.

the very end of the whip, woven together with the ramie (figure 17). In my absence, Huang had continued to weave the last two or three *chi* of the whip. He had also attached the tail to Lin's *shengzhe*: the ritual whip was almost ready (figure 18). The plastic strip, the final step of the process, he explained, would ensure the whip generates a loud, sharp sound. "I've used every kind of rope material, and this red plastic rope is the loudest," he said.⁵⁷ When I arrived that afternoon, it took Huang only a few minutes to attach the plastic tail and bring the thong to completion. "Finished," he said. From the end of the plastic tail to where he started to weave it into the strands of ramie fibers amounted to around ten inches.

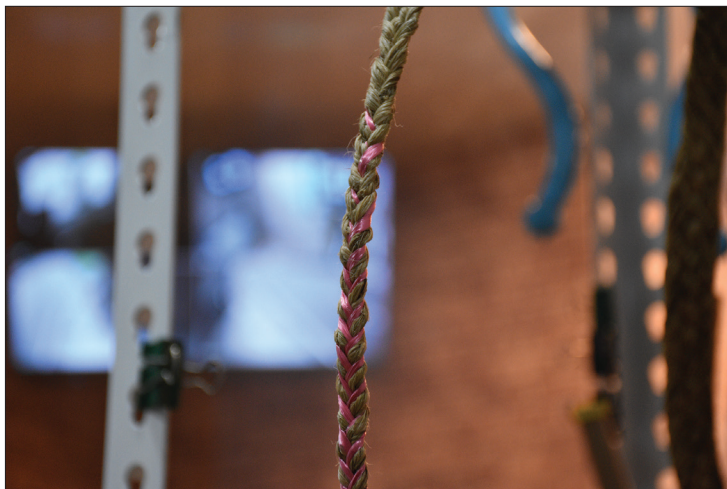


Figure 17. Plastic tail woven into the ramie strands. Photograph by Aaron K. Reich.



Figure 18. Completed *fasuo*. Photograph by Aaron K. Reich.



Figure 19. Huang photographs the completed whip (left); one of his photographs (right). Photographs by Aaron K. Reich and Huang Zhengxiang, respectively.

“Let’s check its mobility,” he said, walking to the side of the room, to the spot where he had first given me a listen to one of his whips weeks before. He held the wooden handle and gave a flick of his wrist; the subtle gesture created a ripple effect, the entire whip undulating from top to bottom. “Look how it sways. See? Did you catch that? This is what I call mobility.” He coiled up the new whip, placed it inside a small photo booth adjacent to his studio space, and took several high-quality photographs (figure 19).

We went out into the warehouse and tried the whip for the first time, taking turns; I followed the method he had taught me earlier in the month: a slow drag across the floor, a quick snap of the wrist, a follow-through with the arm. “Does it sound nice?” he asked. “Very nice,” I said. “It makes a very loud noise,” he said, “and in that last bit, a chirping sound.”⁵⁸ As he was wrapping up the whip for me, we returned to the topic of ritual consecration, to the question of whether to have the whip consecrated, the standard convention when a ritual specialist acquires a new *jingbian*. In days prior, he had suggested that, for me, since I had no immediate plans of using the whip in ritual performance, either choice is fine, to have it consecrated or leave it unconsecrated. But he had given it more thought. “I think you should have it consecrated,” he said. “Otherwise, I’m afraid Saint [Golden Whip] might fall away from it.”⁵⁹ His remark revealed something about his understanding of creativity and its relationship to the sacred: his many hours spent weaving the whip, “pouring his life into it,” as he said, had the effect of infusing the new whip with divine presence. He hoped that I would have the whip consecrated not for the conventional reason of making it sacred, of bringing it to life. Rather, the handcrafted whip was already sacred, already a living presence, already an assemblage of human and divine forces and flows. Consecration, in Huang’s view, would serve to fortify a sacred presence that he and Lin had already transmitted into the object through their respective “technologies of enchantment” (Pinney and Thomas 2020).



Figure 20. Liu Zhangxiang performs a consecration ritual for the *shengzhe*. Photograph still from Aaron K. Reich’s field footage.

At the time of this writing, in 2023, Huang Zhengxiang the weaver, the Snake Master, continues to braid whips for clients and friends, always changing, developing new patterns, creating new ways to serve Saint Golden Whip. On the road to becoming one of Taiwan's most renowned weavers, an artist with a waiting list of more than three years, Huang had no formal training, no teacher to convey to him the proper techniques, the tricks of the trade. Instead, he studied the work of other artists, and, through much trial and error, he devised his own methods for replicating and improving upon these prototypes. Along the way, he forged a close relationship with the serpent god, the great deity of the ritual whip, who, according to Huang's testimony, revealed to him the flat-braid method, its tightly twisted strands rendering whips as hard as stone, capable of ear-splitting sound. An artist involved in the maintenance of an established tradition, the artistic production of *jingbian*, among the most central ritual implements in all of Taiwan, Huang's rise to prominence resulted entirely from his own methods, his own ideas for producing and perfecting this traditional craft. In his own words, "to study [this art] to the point of mastery, you need much inspiration, many ways of thinking, and many ways of making."⁶⁰ Whether understood as creative inspiration, divine revelation, or some combination of the two, these ways of thinking and making, these ideas and methods, in Huang's view, come not from outside of the artist, from teachers or books, but from within him, born from his engagement with the material world.

Concluding remarks

To honor the weaver's wish, I had the whip consecrated in Kaohsiung a few days after leaving Changhua, on June 28, 2021, an auspicious day on the lunar calendar. I asked my friend and close informant, Daoist priest Liu Zhangxiang, to preside over the ritual (figure 20). He took me to a friend's temple and performed an abridged version of his standard liturgy for Opening the Radiance and Dotting the Eyes. He called upon the gods with intoned incantations to the chime of his bell and burned talismans to purify and protect the whip. He marked with vermilion the vital points of the carved handle and woven thong: its eyes, nose, mouth, and ears; its single horn; its back; its heart; its belly; each of its Eight Trigrams; each of its Seven Stars; each *chi* of its braided ramie tail. He cracked the whip three times, its first use in a ritual context. "That whip has a really loud sound," he told me afterward, when he had finished the ritual. "Once you get it broken in, it'll be even louder."

This article has argued that the two artists at the heart of its case study look to creative improvisation both in the invention of new cultural patterns and in the maintenance of inherited tradition. When creating the two components of the *jingbian*, the serpent-headed handle and the straw-rope thong, its two respective makers, carver and weaver, both ground their artistic practices in their own ideas and methods, ways of the craft that each discovered through the study of older models and a process of trial and error. To make its case, this study highlighted how each artist adapted to his materials and environment, each one discovering over the course of many years optimal techniques that work for him, individual best practices to create components of the *jingbian* that both accord with cultural tradition and

exude a personal flair. In so doing, this article has shed light on an indispensable aspect of cultural transmission that scholars of material religion have largely overlooked, namely the role that individual creativity plays in the establishment and maintenance of cultural patterns. Too often studies of material religion focus on sacred objects and their use without concern for the people and processes that brought them into being in the first place. By shifting the spotlight to two artists who make the respective components of *jingbian*, and by focusing on their collaborative production of a single whip, this study proposes new ways to think about handmade ritual objects, each one an expression of its makers and their modes of invention.

For both artists in this study, and, by implication, other artists involved in the making of material religion, their ability to improvise and thereby leave a mark on posterity seems to derive in the first place from their having allowed the object to leave a mark on them. Both Lin and Huang, as young students in the craft of ritual, became introduced to the *jingbian*, and both soon aspired to make these ritual weapons with their own hands, each one drawn to one of the two integral arts of carving and weaving. The variety of actual ritual whips that the artists handled impressed upon them and became in time an internal image, an archetype, not a single model, but rather an *ideal*, a set of characteristics drawn from older whips and the creative imagination of the two artists. It is not a single whip but rather the *jingbian* as archetype that has impressed upon both artists: for both men, the ritual whip has become an integral part of their way of being in the world. It informs how they spend their days and even influences their dreams. Over time, as a natural response to genuine interest, the artists opened themselves to internal transformation; they have become vehicles for the *jingbian* as archetype, mediums for the serpent deity, not mere cogs in a machine of cultural reproduction but originators of new ideas, methods, and designs. Their creative methods and secret techniques make manifest Saint Golden Whip in forms both old and new, carrying on tradition and reinventing it at the same time, inspiring later artists upon whom their works might leave a mark. Generations into the future, one hundred years from now, a young artist in Malaysia, having heard the lore of Lin Zhengda's double-headed *shengzhe*, may turn to it as a source of inspiration for her own carving. On the west coast of Taiwan, a young artist may inherit a ritual whip woven by Huang Zhengxiang, the legendary Snake Master of Changhua. He might unravel it and braid it again, studying its design. And as the two young artists emulate the works of these great masters, the young artists add their own ideas and methods. Their stories join with those artists who have come before them and leave an impression on those artists whom they, in turn, will inspire.

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NOTES

1. For the entire invocation, see Lü Lizheng (1990, 53–54).
2. In my experience, both contemporary whips in Taiwan and historical whips from Minnan have thongs at least twice as long as the thong described in Asano Haruji (2008, 414).
3. For a comprehensive study of minor rite traditions in Taiwan, see Flanigan (2019).
4. For related uses of the whip in contemporary healing rituals, see Hsieh Shu-wei (2016).
5. For a high-quality photograph of a ritual whip from the Qing period, see Lin (2018, 69).
6. See, for example, Luo Maodeng's (1990) *Sanbao taijian xiyangji tongsu yanyi* [The eunuch Sanbao's journey to the western ocean]; Luo Maodeng was active from the sixteenth to seventeenth century. See also Hong Mai's *Yijian zhi* [Record of the listener] (2006, p. 1737); Hong Mai was born in 1123 and died in 1202.
7. *Da Qing huidian tu*, j.85.
8. To my knowledge, the earliest surviving textual reference to a ritual serpent whip occurs in Bai Yuchan's (1194–1227) writings, specifically in a polemical section on the ritual methods of the “heterodox masters” (*xieshi*) active in his day. See DZ 1307: *Haiqiong Bai zhenren yulu*, 1.11b in the Ming Daoist canon.
9. On these deities and their subjugation of serpent spirits, see respectively Fan Pen Li Chen (2017); Wang (2007); and *Pu'an tanfa* (2010, 12a–14a, “Songbian de gushi” [Story of the pine whip]).
10. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 5, 2021.
11. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 5, 2021.
12. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 5, 2021.
13. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 5, 2021.
14. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 5, 2021.
15. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 5, 2021.
16. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 7, 2021.
17. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 7, 2021.
18. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 6, 2021.
19. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 5, 2021.
20. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 5, 2021.
21. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 6, 2021.
22. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 5, 2021.
23. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 8, 2021.
24. The description of Lin carving this article's *shengzhe* derives from photographs, videos, and messages sent by the artist to the author via Facebook Messenger, from July 2019 to March 2021.
25. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 6, 2021.
26. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 6, 2021.
27. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 7, 2021.

28. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 7, 2021.
29. Lin Zhengda, Facebook message sent to author on June 7, 2021.
30. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 7, 2021.
31. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 7, 2021.
32. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 7, 2021.
33. Lin Zhengda, Facebook messages sent to author on April 10, 2020, and April 13, 2021.
34. Author's fieldnotes, June 10, 2021.
35. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 10, 2021.
36. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 10, 2021.
37. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 10, 2021.
38. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 12, 2021.
39. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 12, 2021.
40. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 12, 2021.
41. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 10, 2021.
42. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 26, 2021.
43. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 12, 2021.
44. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 10, 2021.
45. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 10, 2021.
46. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 10, 2021.
47. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 10, 2021.
48. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 12, 2021.
49. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 12, 2021.
50. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 11, 2021.
51. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 11, 2021.
52. For a reproduction of this couplet and the entire invocation, see Lü Lizheng 1990, 54.
53. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 11, 2021.
54. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 11, 2021.
55. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 12, 2021.
56. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 11, 2021.
57. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 13, 2021.
58. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 26, 2021.
59. Author's fieldnotes, June 26, 2021.
60. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 11, 2021.

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