

Religious Renaissance and the Growth of Civil Society in Greater China

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Shortly before 2:00 a.m. on September 21, 1999, a devastating earthquake struck central Taiwan, killing about 2400 people, injuring tens of thousands, and leaving over 100,000 homeless. In Puli, a mid-sized town close to the epicenter, the chairman of the local section of the "Buddhist Compassion Relief Association," commonly called Tz'u-chi, was shaken out of bed. His house almost collapsed and would later have to be torn down. He could not know the full extent of the disaster because there were no electric lights and no phone service. But he knew what he should do. He headed to the Tz'u-chi headquarters, a small wooden building next to the Puli high school. Twenty or thirty other Tz'u-chi members had also spontaneously headed to the center. Using emergency supplies stored there, supplemented with food brought from their own homes, they began cooking hot breakfasts for earthquake survivors. By dawn, a long line of people had gathered in front of the center for comfort and meals. There had been no way for the Tz'u-chi center to announce that it was going



to carry out earthquake relief work, but people knew that Tz'u-chi was the natural place to turn for help.¹

By 5:00 a.m. a specially equipped truck had arrived from the large Tz'u-chi branch in the central city of Taichung and began to report on the extent of the damage by radio telephone (ordinary cell phones did not work) to the Tz'u-chi headquarters in Hualien. Later in the morning Tz'u-chi began delivering medical supplies and personnel. Eventually, Tz'u-chi would raise more than 250 million dollars for earthquake relief. In addition it mobilized more than 100,000 volunteers to help in rescue, cleanup, and reconstruction.²

Tz'u-chi was the largest and most sophisticated non-governmental contributor to the earthquake relief, but it was by no means alone. Monks and nuns and many lay volunteers from the organization called "Buddha's Light Mountain" or Fokwangshan, were also a highly visible and effective presence. A somewhat smaller community, "Dharma Drum Mountain," set up "comfort the heart service teams" to provide psychological counseling from a Buddhist perspective. The "Performing Heaven's Business" (Hsing Tien Kung) Daoist temple in Taipei donated 6 million dollars for earthquake relief.

Besides providing material help, some of these organizations played a crucial public role in providing meaning to a stunned population. In Taipei subway stations and on full-page ads in the newspapers, there were huge pictures of Dharma Master Sheng Yen, the master of Dharma Drum Mountain, with the slogan "Get going Taiwan!" In widely broadcast TV lectures, Sheng Yen

¹ Interviews conducted with directors of the Tz'u-chi center in Puli in October 1999. Unless otherwise noted, information in this chapter is based on interviews with members (including leaders) of the various religious organizations studied and on participant-observation ethnography. Most of the research was carried out between September 1999 and January 2000, when I was a research fellow at the Academia Sinica in Taiwan. The Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation provided funding for this project. I gathered additional data during a two-week research trip in July 2001, funded by the Pacific Rim Program of the University of California Office of the President. Able research assistance was provided by Ho Hua-chin and Kuo Yah-yu.

² Reports issued by Tz'u-chi Foundation.

encouraged Taiwanese not to think of the disaster as the result of bad karma for previous sins but as an important opportunity to make Taiwan safer and better for future generations. Meanwhile Master Hsing Yun of Buddha's Light Mountain was offering similar reassurance, while Master Cheng Yen of Tz'u-chi urging Taiwanese to show one another compassionate care in this time of trial.

Such activities were a powerful public display of a remarkable religious renaissance that has been taking place in Taiwan from the mid-1980s down to the present—a time period that, not coincidentally, corresponds to Taiwan's transition to economic prosperity and political democracy.³ Taiwan has always been an island full of folk religion. Even today, in a cosmopolitan city like Taipei, practically every block has at least a small shrine and every district at least one large temple. In rural villages and towns, temples are even more prevalent. The months of the lunar calendar are punctuated with many festivals. All phases of the life cycle are marked with colorful rituals. But until recently, popular Taiwanese religious practices have mostly represented the parochial, particularistic, habit-driven aspects of traditional Taiwanese life, rather than the cosmopolitan, rationalized, reflexive aspirations of its modernizers.⁴

The Daoist (and sometimes Buddhist—because Taiwanese folk religion is often syncretistic) deities housed in spectacularly cluttered local temples were local gods, who took care of their own. Though the temples carried out works of charity, these were usually confined to their particular communities. Deeply embedded in the

³ For a history of Taiwan's economic development, see Thomas B. Gold, *State and Society in the Taiwan Miracle* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1987). For a history of political transformation, see Shelley Rigger, *Politics in Taiwan: Voting for Democracy* (London: Routledge, 1999). For statistics on Taiwan's religious renaissance, see Wen-hui Tsai, "Folk Religion in Modernizing Taiwan," *American Asian Review*, vol. 14, no. 3 (fall, 1996), 5-15.

⁴ For an overview, see Robert P. Weller, *Unities and Diversities in Chinese Religion* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1987). For an account of how Taiwanese religious practice is beginning to change, see Robert P. Weller, *Alternate Civilities: Democracy and Culture in China and Taiwan* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), pp. 83-134.

social and political life of their communities, such temples were nexus of those informal, particularistic, clientalistic relationships that political reformers usually label "corruption." To this day, such temples are not infrequently accused of being conduits for money laundering and political patronage. Popular religious activities have been focused on rituals for bringing personal good fortune and a happy afterlife, not on organized efforts to improve one's moral life and change society.⁵

The past two decades, however, have witnessed the rapid rise of new forms of religious practice with broad appeal to Taiwan's emerging middle classes. These are based on "humanistic" (*renjian*) efforts to reconcile traditional beliefs with modern science and technology, to provide answers to the moral dilemmas presented by mobile, urban lifestyles, and to provide solutions to the social problems faced by a dynamically industrializing society. These new forms of religious practice are propagated by sophisticated organizations, employing the latest advances in information technology and reaching out into the Taiwanese Diaspora around the world.

It has been a renaissance mostly of Buddhism and Daoism. Despite the considerable efforts of foreign missionaries, the combined presence of Catholics and Protestants in Taiwan never amounted to more than about seven percent of the population; and although some denominations continue to grow, the aggregate numbers of practicing Christians have been declining.⁶ It is an ironic development, because many Protestants and Catholics in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s saw themselves, with some degree of accuracy, as Taiwan's modernizers. When Taiwan was still a largely rural society, they established major universities (the Protestant Tunghai and the Catholic Fu Jen), built hospitals, and organized a wide array of professionalized social services—all in contrast to Buddhism and Daoism, which were mostly identified

⁵ Weller, *Alternate Civilities*, 84-88.

⁶ See statistics from early 1990s in Wen-hui Tsai, "Folk Religion in Modernizing Taiwan," p. 10. More recent surveys show that Christians constitute only about five percent of the total population. Chiu Hei-yuan, *Taiwan Shehui Bianqian Jiben Diaocha Jihua: Disanqi Disanci Diaocha Zhixing Baogao* (Taipei: Institute of Sociology, Academia Sinica, 1998).

with traditional, rural folk religious practice. But by the time Taiwan really did become modernized, it was Buddhists, and some Daoists, that emerged as the major vehicles for the moral aspirations of the new urban middle classes.

The religious renaissance has made important contributions to Taiwan's civic culture. Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) President of Taiwan celebrated this in his inaugural address in May 2000:

“Amid the fierce power of Nature, we have seen Taiwan's most beautiful compassion, strongest faith and greatest trust. Our compatriots have been injured and wounded during the September 21 earthquake, but with the spirit of a ‘volunteer Taiwan,’ Taiwan's new family will stand up resolutely on its feet once again.”

When Chen's audience heard the words “compassion...faith...and trust” and “the spirit of a ‘volunteer Taiwan’” in connection with the “September 21 earthquake,” they most likely first thought of those Buddhist and Daoist organizations that had done so much to mobilize citizens in response to the crisis. In this paper, we will argue that the compassion, faith, and trust nurtured by such organizations have indeed helped constitute the moral basis of a successful transition to democracy.

That there has occurred such a religious renaissance in Taiwan with basically positive civic consequences is something surprising that calls out for explanation. No less a sociologist than Max Weber deemed Buddhism and Daoism incapable of sustaining the rational, inner-worldly asceticism necessary for the transition to modernity.⁷ Moreover, until the late 1970s, Taiwan's KMT government did whatever it could to discourage the modernization of Taiwanese Buddhism and Daoism.

A partial exception was the KMT's policy toward Christian missionaries. Because of its need to maintain favor with the United States, the KMT government was somewhat more tolerant towards Protestant and Catholic missionaries than toward its indigenous religions. For example, it allowed Protestants and Catholics to

⁷ Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. by Ephraim Fischhoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), pp. 95-99.

establish universities, while denying this right to Buddhists and Daoists.

Under these circumstances, one might have expected that as the Taiwanese economy shifted away from agriculture to an increasingly knowledge-intensive high tech industry, its mobile, cosmopolitan, well-educated urban middle classes would either replace their traditional folk religious practices with Christianity or with nothing. The surprising renaissance in “humanistic” Buddhism and what I will call “reform” Daoism raises the following questions. How have Buddhist and Daoist leaders been able to reform their religious practices in ways that would appeal to large numbers of urban Taiwanese? How have they managed quickly to create effective organizations? Despite an early history of government constraints on large-scale religious organizations, how have Taiwanese Buddhists and Daoists managed not only to grow in size and influence, but also to do so in a way that maintains constructive working relations with the government? Finally, given the fervor that is associated with some of these religious groups and their appeal to different constituencies within Taiwan, what has kept them from becoming a divisive rather than a unifying force in Taiwan’s civil society?

(At this point in the full-length article, the author seeks to answer these questions by comparing the histories of four groups whose similarities represent important general trends, and whose differences give us clues about the complicated origins and directions of these trends. The first three groups are forms of “humanistic Buddhism,”⁸ the fourth a “reformed” version of Daoism. The information on these groups comes mostly from the author’s own ethnographic and archival research.)

⁸ For a brief introduction to the development of “humanistic Buddhism” in twentieth century China, see Raoul Birnbaum, “Buddhism,” *China Quarterly* 174 (June 2003). Wang Shunmin, “Zongjiao fuli fuwu zhi chubu kaocha: yi Fuguangshan, Fagushan, yu Ciji weili,” *Si yu Yan*, vol. 32, no. 3 (1994): pp. 33-111.

Common Patterns of Religious Evolution

Despite important differences, all four of these groups share features that come from a common wrestling with the dilemmas of Taiwan's modernization.

First, all of them have at least partially demythologized traditional beliefs. That is, instead of taking these beliefs as a solid, literal representation of a world beyond the one of ordinary experience, they see the beliefs as symbolic expressions of the challenges of common human life. Reminiscent of the quest of the Protestant theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer for a "religionless Christianity,"⁹ some of the members of these Taiwanese organizations describe their faith as "religionless." As a nun at Fokuangshan put it, "This is our cultural tradition, it isn't a religion." Another nun at the Tz'u-chi monastery spoke of her commitment as a "way to express the culture of my race." Members of Dharma Drum Mountain described their practice as more philosophy than religion and, as we have seen, the leaders of Hsing Tien Kung talk of their deities as symbols of moral principles within their cultural tradition.

When they say things like this, however, they are not advocating an uncritical acceptance of their inherited culture. As Hsing Yun, the founder of Buddha's Light Mountain writes: "Professor John Dewey, the American philosopher, educator, and teacher of Dr. Hu Shih, once said, 'We must reappraise the meaning of value.' His remark has had a tremendous impact on my thinking and my method of reappraisal and reorientation when dealing with issues of Buddhism, life, and society ... I do not unconditionally follow tradition. I do not toy with the idea of emptiness and talk in vain about abstruse things. I do not consciously accept the opinion of the majority. Instead, I constantly review our tradition, observe, and think about the future of Buddhism. I keep on reappraising values as I grow."¹⁰ Members of Tz'u-chi sometimes refer to this process as "adaptation to life" (*shenghuohua*), adapting the best of

⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (London, SCM Press, 1971).

¹⁰ Venerable Master Hsing Yun, *The Philosophy of Being Second*, (Hacienda Heights, CA: Hsi Lai University Press, 2000), 76.

their cultural values to the changing conditions of life in modern Taiwan. The other two groups we have described also support earnest efforts to get back to the basic premises of their traditions and extend them to modern conditions.

In all the groups, there is indeed much talk about "cultivating the heart" (*xiu xin*), a term well known from books on Confucian philosophy, but one that I had never heard used much in ordinary conversation until I became engaged with these Taiwanese religious groups. The term refers to the process of spiritual development that enables one to understand how to apply them in the broadest possible contexts. The many, multimedia publications of all of the groups aim to facilitate this understanding.

Another common characteristic of the groups studied here is a devaluation of ritual. Though all of them still regularly practice rituals, they all claim to subordinate external ritual practice to internalized morality. As one Tz'u-chi commissioner put it: "It is changing the heart ... Instead of offering two sacrifices every month, cultivate yourself."

Along with a devaluation of ritual comes a dilution of hierarchy. In their formal structure they remain authoritarian, not democratic. The Dharma Master in the Buddhist organizations is a supreme leader whose decisions are final. The priests of the Hsing Tien Kung have unchallenged authority in interpretations of ritual and practice. But if rituals led by Buddhist monks or nuns or by Daoist priests are no longer as important as the good intentions harbored in a well cultivated heart, then laypeople can be just as important as ordained masters. All of the organizations studied here have created dynamic associations of lay followers, ... Even though formal hierarchy remains, its power is diluted by, as well as disseminated through, the active initiatives of the lay associations.

Most of Tz'u-chi's work is focused on humanistic philanthropies of charity, medicine, education, and culture. There is far more emphasis on these works of mercy than on traditional Buddhist meditation and prayer ceremonies. If in Buddha's Light Mountain prayer before statues of the Buddha is supposed to lead to a compassionate heart that will perform works of charity, in Tz'u-chi, it is the ritualized performance of philanthropy that leads to meaningful prayer.

By reputation, the four religious organizations that we have studied correspond to different fractions of Taiwan's middle class. But common sense among educated people in Taipei makes the following distinctions. Hsing Tien Kung is the most "downscale" of the four. It is most attractive to shopkeepers, clerical workers, and retail clerks. Buddha's Light Mountain attracts fairly affluent business owners, as well as government officials and politicians. Tz'u-chi has especially strong attraction to people in modern managerial and service professions. Dharma Drum Mountain has special appeal to intellectuals.

Religious Renaissance and Taiwanese Politics

[All four organizations] have cooperative relations with the government. Their contribution to Taiwan's political culture is thus a conservative, stabilizing one. Since they see the state as a necessary, positive force, they are not tempted to mobilize particular constituencies against it. Even though they may naturally attract different fractions of the middle class, they have no interest in fomenting class conflict. To the contrary, since they wish to expand, they have every interest in reaching out to as broad a cross section of the population as possible. This is justified, especially for the Buddhist groups, by a religious commitment to "great compassion for all." As they expanded during the 1990s, therefore, they have in practice served to soften class and ethnic divisions even though by reputation they represent different segments of the middle class. The reputations are based on their position within the Taiwanese cultural landscape at the moment when they emerged from the restrictions of martial law and began the process of seeking more members. Their ecumenical practices are based on their commitment to expand in a non-conflictual way with a basic attitude of respect for the state.

Even though their leaders and most committed members see them as religious rather than political enterprises, such religious organizations have non-intended, beneficent civic consequences. They help take some of the rough edges out of the conflicts between native Taiwanese and Mainlanders and between relatively successful and relatively poor. They nurture a spirit of engagement with public affairs and encourage a cooperative (but not uncritical)

attitude toward the government. By no means do I argue that such religious organizations (as some of their members, particularly those in Tz'u-chi, might say) are the solution to Taiwan's social and political problems. Taiwanese political culture continues to have many rough edges and sometimes teeters on the brink of chaos. The fact that despite a history of atrocities committed by Mainlanders against Taiwanese, despite the legacy of a harshly authoritarian regime, despite a "Confucian" cultural tradition that many experts have considered incompatible with democratic values, despite all of its tensions with Mainland China, despite its lack of political recognition by the international community, Taiwan has nonetheless avoided chaos and made a successful, if still shaky, transition to a stable democracy—this is perhaps the true "Taiwan miracle." The fact that some of Taiwan's most influential religious organizations have moderated conflict rather than added to it is an important part of this miracle.

Globalization and Religious Renaissance

Besides being influenced by particular currents in Taiwanese history, the middle-class religious renaissance is also influenced by broader trends in cultural globalization. The homogenization of popular cultural symbols—the "McDonaldization" of the world—seems, paradoxically, to evoke a resurgence of particular identities, expressed through local cultural practices, around the world.¹¹ Thus, in offering Coca-Cola to the gods, Hsing Tien Kung practitioners affirm their participation in a world of multinational consumer goods, but affirm a particular Taiwanese identity as well. On a more upscale level, Tz'u-chi members do the same when they accept BMW ads for their magazine. However, unlike societies where the assertion of particular religious identities leads to hostility toward the rest of the world—as Benjamin Barber puts it, in *Jihad vs. McWorld*—the assertion of Buddhist and Daoist identities in Taiwan leads more toward ecumenical cooperation.

¹¹ Benjamin R. Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995).

Perhaps this is because of their history of borrowing from different cultural and religious traditions. Although based on Chinese religious traditions, the organizations I have described on Taiwan have absorbed many influences from Japan and the West to create their new forms of religious practice. The most important influence has been from Japan, both from the Japanese colonial period (1895-1945) and from the more recent past.¹² Japanese Buddhism has been more focused on worldly service than traditional Chinese Buddhism. Master Cheng Yen's first Buddhist teacher, Master Hsiu Tao, had gone to school in Japan, and helped introduce to Cheng Yen the notion that monasteries should work in the world.¹³ Japanese Buddhism had also pioneered the organization of educated lay women for community service. (After the Meiji Restoration, Japanese women were able to get higher education but could not work in most occupations. Thus their knowledge and energy could be mobilized for volunteer community service.) But the Japanese Buddhists had moved away from the strict practices of Chinese Buddhism—for instance Japanese monks could get married. While adopting the social concerns of the Japanese Buddhists, Taiwanese Buddhists maintained the purity of Chinese monastic life, and thus helped maintain a distinctive cultural identity.

Taiwanese religions also borrowed from the West, sometimes in order to compete with it. Administrators at the Hsing Tien Kung Foundation said that the idea of organizing volunteers to help the community was brought to Taiwan by the service clubs formed by American military wives. According to Tz'u-chi's official history, Master Cheng Yen was inspired to take up social service work after being visited by three Catholic nuns who tried to show her that Catholicism was superior to Buddhism because it performed so many works of social service. Whatever the accuracy of this story, it suggests that competition with Christians was one force driving Tz'u-chi's religious evolution. The theme of competition gets even stronger with Buddha's Light Mountain. Master Hsing Yun saw the encroachment of Christianity on Taiwan

¹² Jiang Canteng, *Taiwan Fojiao Wenhua Fajianshi: Rijū Shiqi*, (Taipei: Nantian Chubanshe, 2000).

¹³ Information graciously provided me by Alise DiVido.

as problematic. He thought that he had to adopt some of the effective religious marketing used by Western Christian organizations if he was to maintain Buddhism's place in Taiwan.¹⁴ Other Buddhist groups as well as reformed Daoist organizations like the Hsing Tien Kung adopted his methods. By now, all of the religious organizations we have described in this paper have more sophisticated magazines, television programs, and websites than most Christian organizations in Taiwan.

These religious movements are thus like the rest of Taiwan's emerging national culture, a distinctive refiguration of Chinese cultural traditions under the stimulus of influences from Japan and the United States—a distinctive blend of East and West that is made in Taiwan. With their visibility and global outreach these Taiwanese religious organizations can become vehicles for the collective representation of national identity, a role that looms especially large in Taiwan's peculiar geopolitical circumstances.

Facing a serious challenge from the Chinese mainland, however, the Taiwanese can ill afford to assert their national identity in a way that would antagonize supporters in the United States, Europe, and Japan. There is a special incentive to portray Taiwanese cultural uniqueness in a way that emphasizes Taiwan's openness, tolerance, and flexibility, in contrast to Mainland China's relative closedness, aggressiveness, and rigidity. This helps explain why middle class Taiwanese are attracted to forms of religion that are different from mainstream religion in the West, but display an ecumenical openness that would be attractive to the West.

Globalization has influenced not just the content of Taiwanese Buddhism and Daoism but its forms of organization. The religious organizations studied here have expanded so rapidly

¹⁴ As Fu Chi-ying puts it, "The seed [for the idea of building Hsi Lai Temple in Los Angeles] was sown when Hsing Yun first came to America as a guest of its bicentennial celebrations... The country's cultural diversity and receptiveness struck him irrevocably. Further, the need for a spiritual anchorage for the fast increasing number of immigrants of Chinese heritage was more than obvious. But most of all, Hsing Yun pondered, in contrast to the heavily armed and intrusive ways in which Christianity penetrated China in the last century, could Buddhism now be taught peacefully in the West?" Fu Chi-ying, *op. cit.*, 345.

because of their mastery of global communication. In the past two decades, Taiwan has become one of the world's leading manufacturers of information technology. The expertise is available for local religious groups to make full use of this technology. Just as important as mastery of the hardware, however, is the ability to master the software—the ability to use global icons and idioms to communicate via television, the Internet, and image-laden magazines. Taiwan's emerging middle classes, many of whom travel widely throughout Asia and to the United States and Europe and who are immersed in an advertising-saturated consumer culture, have become very familiar with such images.

“Some foreigners see Taiwan simply as a ‘casino society,’” said Tz'u-chi's spokesperson (a former official in Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs) to a gathering of foreign journalists in the fall of 1999. “But the way we have generously responded to our earthquake—and the way we have helped other people who have faced natural disasters around the world—shows that this is not true. We are a loving society who see the world as a global village.” There are indeed plenty of crass elements of Taiwanese society that are visible for the world to see: financial speculation, political corruption, blatant materialism, rude habits and sexual exploitation (nicely joined together in the use of scantily clad young women to sell packages of the ubiquitously chewed betel nut), and reckless destruction of the natural environment. The religious organizations we have been discussing here project an image of a better Taiwan. Because the image is not mere political propaganda, but a sincere representation of ideals actually lived out in practice by at least some members of these organizations, it has credibility both to domestic and foreign audiences. It thus has some capacity to bring into being what it imagines. The act of sincerely imagining an ideal Taiwan encourages Taiwan's citizens to live up to the ideal.

Consequences for Civic Culture in Taiwan and in the World

The crassness in Taiwan's consumer culture is accompanied by unruly belligerence in its national political culture. The religious movements we have been discussing, however, contribute a softer dimension—one that emphasizes peace over conflict and mutual respect among ethnic groups over competition.

What I have tried to demonstrate in this chapter is only that Taiwan's emerging middle classes have generated forms of religious imagination and religious association that are playing a positive role in building a moderate, responsible, civic culture. Buddhists might say that the emergence of such religious resources was the result of good karma. But from a sociological point of view it was by no means preordained. I have tried to show how it was the result of a fortuitous confluence of separate processes, as well as by the wisdom that enabled certain spiritual leaders to make best use of the "causes and conditions" in which they found themselves.

The Taiwan case shows that strict political control over religion (as exercised by the authoritarian KMT against Taiwanese Buddhism and Daoism) does not necessarily either destroy religion or cause religion to react fiercely against the state once the repression is ended. It shows that, in a Chinese cultural context, it is possible for the state to win the active cooperation of religion while respecting the autonomy of religious leaders over their own organizations. It shows that Buddhism and Daoism have the capacity both to adapt to modernity and to humanize the modern world. It shows that globalization can help lead to a kind of religious renaissance that leads to dialogue among civilizations rather than clashes between them. This might give us hope for the emergence of positive religious developments in the People's Republic of China with beneficial consequences for peaceful transitions to democracy in the Asia Pacific. But our analysis also shows that these positive outcomes require a good measure of luck, or, from the Buddhist point of view, fate (*yuanfen*), or, from the Christian point of view, the grace of God.