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<b>Year:</b>	2012
<b>Title:</b>	<i>Taiwan's Tzu Chi as Engaged Buddhism: Origins, Organization, Appeal and Social Impact</i>
<b>Publisher:</b>	Global Oriental
<b>City:</b>	Leiden
<b>Number of Pages:</b>	244
<b>Price:</b>	€ 78,41
<b>ISBN:</b>	978-9004217478

**Review:**

It is many years since I have enjoyed an academic book so much as this one, or benefited so much from reading it. I had the good fortune to be invited by Global Oriental to read a manuscript submitted to them for publication. Since I do not know Chinese, and have no specialist knowledge of Chinese religion, I was disinclined to accept; but I was moved to do so by being told that the author, who lived in Taiwan, had spent nearly ten years looking for a publisher for this, her first book in English. For once, my virtue has been rewarded.

The book is closely based on a Ph.D. thesis for the University of London, where it was examined by Professor David Martin and Mrs W.M. Morgan. Though some of the data, and particularly the figures, are no longer up to date, the book is not mere reportage, but an extremely thoughtful and illuminating analysis, so that it does not lose value over time. I have no hesitation in describing it as a brilliant achievement.

The book describes and analyses a Buddhist sect or movement which was founded in a remote part of Taiwan in 1966 by a young lady originally called Jin Yun (b.1937). Since her (irregular) ordination in 1963 as a nun, she has been known as Master Cheng Yen. She is still in sole control of the movement. When Dr. Yao began her fieldwork in 1995, the movement had about 3.5 million members, including over 20,000 full time volunteers, and was still dominated by women. Though it had some male members earlier, a formal male section was created only in 1990. By the time her thesis was examined, in 2001, membership had almost doubled, and about half of the members were men. It has continued to expand, and recently has been permitted to set up a branch in mainland China. Membership is scrupulously documented. Except among student members, the dropout rate appears to be negligible.

The book is written from a macro-sociological perspective. It stands firmly in the Anglo-American tradition of the sociology of religion, which owes most to Max Weber. More specifically, it studies a new religious movement (NRM) in the spirit and with the methods and techniques of the late Bryan Wilson and his many pupils. Dr Yao was not among them, but acknowledges a particular debt to the monograph on Soka Gakkai in Britain by Wilson and Karel Dobbelaere.<sup>i</sup> She frequently cites and uses the theories and views of sociologists of this school. In particular, a whole chapter near the end of the book is titled “Does Tzu Chi meet the Expectations of Current Sociological Theory?” and looks at whether it meets the ten criteria proposed by Rodney Stark for the success of an NRM.<sup>ii</sup> (Her answer to the question is; “Broadly, yes.”) While her analysis is extraordinarily well done, this chapter will mainly interest specialists and may be skipped by the general reader. The rest of the book, on the other hand, is utterly accessible, not least because it is so well organised and clearly written, without a word of waffle or unnecessary jargon. This last virtue is so rare in academic sociology that it must surely be singled out for celebration.

The clarity of expression and organization is already conspicuous in the two introductory chapters. These are *not* to be skipped. The first gives a *tour d’horizon* of Taiwan’s religious landscape, gradually narrowing the focus to NRMs. Even someone as completely ignorant of Taiwan as I was is thus taught enough about the context to feel comfortable with the details to come. The next chapter, on the author’s methods, could in my view be presented to students as a model. The clarity here serves not merely an aesthetic, or even just an intellectual, purpose, but reflects the author’s honesty and total lack of pretentiousness. The section on the strengths and weaknesses of the methods employed is particularly admirable. I never thought that I would actually enjoy reading a chapter devoted to matters of method.

Chapters 3 to 8 present the results of the research. Chapter 3 recounts the founder’s early life and what led to her founding a movement. She left home in 1960 soon after her father died, and despite her mother’s entreaties led an independent and ascetic religious life, at first with an older nun and then by herself. She slowly acquired a few devotees, and even more slowly began to study Buddhist texts.

“In the mid-1960s, three Catholic nuns came to visit Cheng Yen with the intention to try to convert her ... [T]hey told Cheng Yen that most Buddhist disciples only seek to prepare for life after death and do not perform actual deeds that deal with the problems of society. They claimed ... that there were not Buddhists who built schools and hospitals the way that Christians did” (p.66). This made Cheng Yen think, and she studied the compassionate activities of the Bodhisattva Guan Yin. In those days there was no system of state provision or other charitable help for those in medical need. Hospitals regularly required a large deposit before admitting a patient for treatment, and in remote parts, such as down the east coast, where Cheng Yen lived, medical facilities were sadly inadequate. She began by asking her devotees, mostly housewives, to help her raise money to pay for medical deposits for the poor. Initially they did this by knitting baby shoes. They also gave voluntary labour

to help the poor and the sick. By 1978, though the movement was still only local, they had raised and spent over a million New Taiwan Dollars (nearly L25,000) and helped over 500 people.

At this point, Cheng Yen announced a project to build a large new hospital. “[T]here was no large hospital in Hualien, only several small ones which were run by Christian missions. A new hospital would, therefore, not only supply income for Tzu Chi but also prevent the loss of potential converts to Christianity, as patients in the Christian hospitals often became Christians themselves. In addition, it was seen as a more efficient way to help the needy by providing medical treatment directly instead of paying for somebody else to supply it. Because Master Cheng Yen regarded sickness as the primary cause of misery and poverty, constructing a hospital seemed to fit perfectly with her philosophy” (pp.72-3). By a lucky chance, at that time “a new railway line which went round the whole island was completed, enabling Cheng Yen to travel frequently to preach in Taipei, and the Movement took root in the capital. ... [M]ost of its members and donations have since been recruited there”(p.73). The movement caught the attention of prominent citizens, including some influential politicians, and of the media. It has never looked back.

Thus “the motivation for Cheng Yen to become a Buddhist nun came from social reasons rather than religious calling.” She founded her movement, “The Buddhist Compassion Merit Society” as a Buddhist medical charity, virtually a mirror image of the Christian medical charities found almost all over the world; nor has this side of it ever diminished. Some members who were asked why they found Tzu Chi appealing referred to this directly: “I was very glad to hear Tzu Chi was aware of the needs of our society and that one of our Buddhist nuns could do the same things as Christians” (p.182).

In the ‘80s, the movement expanded its aims and ambitions. The Taipei branch became the centre of its “cultural” mission, mainly propagated through print, including free monthly magazines, and over radio and TV. The mission was also extended to educating the rich about the problems in society that they should attend to. This then led to relief work abroad, including (controversially) in mainland China. In 1989 a Nursing College was completed, to be followed by a Medical College, and these have been developed into a whole university. “[S]he has employed three vice-executives to oversee the missions of education, medicine and culture, and reserves only the mission of charity for herself” (p.76).

Over this entire period Tzu Chi has developed its organization. Membership imposes continual duties, above all in raising funds and recruiting more members. Many means have been devised to enhance the spirit of community among members. Moreover, while the Master’s leadership and charisma have never been in question, in some respects her status has approached the superhuman. None of these features are peculiar to religious movements, and the Master constantly stresses the importance of material self-sufficiency (see her speech to new initiates, p.177). So is Tzu Chi in fact a religious movement?

Chapter 4, “Altruism and morality become a way of life”, soon dispels any such doubt. As usual in Buddhism, “morality” here refers to ethical self-control. The chapter introduces the movement’s remarkable ideology. All of it has come, piecemeal, from Cheng Yen, and much of the chapter is culled from her two books, *The Silent Thoughts I* and *II*, which have both been bestsellers in Taiwan.

The movement is indeed unmistakably Buddhist. Its two central Buddhist features are the devotion given to Guan Yin, the embodiment of compassion, and the prominence given to the classical Buddhist teaching of karma. Both of these features make Tzu Chi’s Buddhism predominantly an ethical teaching, one which stresses the practical and is concerned with improving the here and now. Members must “enter the gate of compassion before they can enter the gate of Buddhism”. This is obviously consonant with the movement’s roots as a medical charity.

Traditional Mahayana recognises a set of six moral qualities which every future Buddha, and thus every devout Buddhist, must strive to bring to perfection; and besides compassion Cheng Yen also lays particular emphasis on three of them: self-restraint through following moral rules; determination; and wisdom/understanding. The whole ethos has a puritanical flavour, and despite some great differences in detail, due to the utterly different historical circumstances, it recalls the flavour of the ethical code for laymen laid down by the Buddha. After all, this is essentially a lay movement, and, as in early Buddhism, each signed up member assumes the responsibility to conform to a specific code of behaviour. For instance, Cheng Yen recommends praying twice a day, but the only true function of prayer is self-scrutiny. Similarly, Tzu Chi and early Buddhism alike reject most of the religious rituals of the society around them. For example, Tzu Chi celebrates the local *secular* festivals, but not the traditional festivals of Chinese Buddhism.

At first blush, it looks as if Cheng Yen’s teaching of karma follows the Buddhist mainstream. Nevertheless, some of her views would hardly have met with the Buddha’s assent, and probably owe much to the widespread Chinese idea of fate. For example, “a husband’s extramarital affair is considered to be the result of the wife’s bad karma”, and she advises a female disciple, “Don’t call it an affair. You should view it as an opportunity...” (p.80). She means, an opportunity to learn how to cope with suffering. The contrast with Buddhist tradition is greater than that with the Buddha himself: even wisdom can be better cultivated by interaction with people than by scriptural study and meditation. Cheng Yen stresses action, not mere intentions, and (as Dr Yao remarks) in this respect follows the *Vinaya* more closely than Buddhist ethics in general.

Indeed, some of her views on death and the afterlife are so unorthodox that karma seems to be deprived of its metaphysical underpinnings and become an ethical teaching pure and simple. Her views on death deserve to be quoted at length.

Tzu Chi has developed a distinctive ritual for the deceased called *zhunian* (assistance chanting). It consists of a group of people reciting the name of a Buddha, A-mi-tuo-fo (the Chinese version of Amitabha Buddha). When a direct kinsman of a member dies, other members will gather at the home of the deceased immediately to perform *zhunian*...

It is said the function of *zhunian* is to help the dying soul to find the way to heaven. According to Cheng Yen, when death occurs the soul will have to leave the body and go to either hell or heaven in preparation for the next birth. The time between death and rebirth is ... between a few hours and forty-nine days, depending on the karma of the deceased: the better the karma, the sooner will the person be reborn. Cheng Yen says it is a period of transition for the deceased as well as for the surviving kin: the soul may be very confused after departing from the body and may not find the way to heaven, and the living kin may be highly emotional over the loss of the beloved one. The feelings of the living kin, however, can hinder the soul's ability to detach itself from the body and may cause the soul to miss the opportunity for rebirth.

Cheng Yen claims the purpose of *zhunian* is twofold: it directs the soul on its way to heaven, and it creates a peaceful and calm atmosphere for the survivors... *Zhunian* begins as soon as death is announced and is continued for at least eight hours. This is the length of the time which the soul usually takes to depart from its physical body. Cheng Yen advises that *zhunian* is to be performed for seven days but not longer than forty-nine days, the maximum time span before rebirth. Meanwhile the family of the deceased is advised to follow a [Buddhist] vegetarian diet. Cheng Yen said that bad karma would be generated by the killing of an animal and what the mourners had eaten during this period would count against the deceased, and thus reduce the chances for a fortunate rebirth.

Since the function of *zhunian* is merely to guide the departed soul but does not transfer any merit to it, this shows a transient concept of one's relations to one's dead ancestor... Cheng Yen does not mention how to assist the souls which have missed the moment of rebirth or are held in hell. The true function of *zhunian* is best understood as improving life in this world ...

Most importantly, *zhunian* helps people to overcome the traditional negative attitude towards death. Death is traditionally seen as a kind of pollution and will bring bad luck and illness to the world of the living, so that traditionally only close kin are involved with funerals. For an outsider, it is considered to be extremely unlucky to encounter a funeral. Tzu Chi's practice of death rituals offers the members a more reasonable solution to fit in with their urban modern lives. Not only the relatives of the dead but also Tzu Chi members participate in Tzu Chi funerals, and they are aware that this creates a new form of interpersonal relationship in the cities....

Cheng Yen sees death from the point of view of reincarnation (rebirth). Since the soul will re-enter the circle of reincarnation, the relationship between the deceased and his/her living kin will soon be terminated. It is consequently impossible to maintain any bond between the deceased and his/her surviving relatives, and they no longer share a common collective karma after the forty-nine day period. Against the traditional belief, in Cheng Yen's view dead ancestors will not have any influence on the living descendants beyond this period...

Cremation and preservation of the ashes in a Buddhist funeral parlour are encouraged by Cheng Yen. Tzu Chi regards death as a rather cheerful event, an equivalent to a new beginning of the next life. The funeral is like a farewell party for the dead, so not only relatives but also people from the Movement are invited...(pp.94-6)

Dr Yao then provides a fascinating account of a Tzu Chi funeral. But perhaps the most striking details come last:

Although Tzu Chi provides free funeral services, relatives of the deceased usually donate afterwards to the Movement's funeral fund. Funeral services therefore become an important source of income for Tzu Chi... Cheng Yen asserts that the merit from the donation to the funeral fund cannot be credited to the deceased but accrues to the living donor; and that the only way for the dead to generate merit for him/herself is to donate their body for the public good, e.g. for medical research. The donated bodies usually go to the Movement's hospital.

In Tzu Chi's teachings there is no mention of transferring merit to a dead ancestor or past relatives. The relationship with dead ancestors has been de-emphasized by Cheng Yen, not only in her notion of death but also by her view on performing ancestral rites. For example, in her reply to a devotee's question about performing memorial rites for a dead ancestor, the Master says, 'You should sincerely do something for the dead. Then both the doer and the dead will be blessed, and the doer will obtain a reward for the meritorious deed, while the deceased will contribute to the world by motivating you to become a Buddhist.' It may thus be seen that the emphasis is on the work of the living and not on the deceased ancestors (pp.97-8).

To deny that Tzu Chi is a religion would be perverse; but it hardly qualifies as a soteriology.

The next four chapters, comprising most of the second half of the book, are built on the data Dr Yao collected by means of thirty in-depth interviews and 769 questionnaires. Of the latter she handed out 1,214, and the return rate was 66%, which is most satisfactory. But the interviews were even more valuable, and in my view the 8 months that she says it took her to transcribe them and translate them into English were not wasted.

Chapter 5 discusses the social composition of the membership, chapter 6 the recruiting strategy, chapter 7 the organizational structure and the process of socialisation into the Movement, and chapter 8 analyses the Movement's appeal. There are a lot of tables in chapters 5 and 6, but the text is rarely dry. The material in chapter 7 on affective bonding, indoctrination and initiation strikes me as ethnography at its best.

The general picture of the Membership that emerges is of upward mobility into the middle and even the upper middle class. A very high proportion of members have moved into the city from the countryside. If we leave aside the category of College Student Members, the average age, educational level and (especially) economic standing of members are somewhat higher than those of the general population, so that the Movement's socio-economic profile is much what one would expect when one thinks of Weber's early Protestant bourgeoisie in Europe or, for that matter, the Buddha's following in ancient India.

The author makes it clear that she is particularly interested in why people join and then stay in the movement, and is not content to leave Weber's "elective affinity" to provide all the answers. Chapter 8, packed with quotations from interviews, allows the members to speak for themselves. While motives are diverse, a clear picture emerges. Joining Tzu Chi gives a sense of meaning and purpose to life: members find fulfilment through the self-respect that comes from a life of service to the community. That the demands made on members in terms of both time and money are so heavy only enhances this effect, for it serves to bond members into a new community in which new affective ties can replace those left behind in the countryside or a lower social class, and makes the appeal self-reinforcing.

A constantly recurring theme is the role played by the Master and the way that her disciples see her and relate to her. It is hard not to admire the balance she manages to strike between authority and humanity, between hard-headed practicality and the re-iteration of ideals. It seems that increasing numbers of members express the hope to be reborn with her in life after life.

The interesting "Afterword" gives an idea of recent trends, particularly the drift towards deification of the Master. (Does that await her after death?) It also considers in what sense Tzu Chi can be classed as secular. Finally the "Afterword" picks up a theme adverted to in Chapter 1 and ascribes Tzu Chi's success partly to its being the only Buddhist movement to use Hokkien rather than Mandarin Chinese, thus marking itself out as intended for Taiwanese, not Mainlanders. This prompts the thought that successful social movements are often characterised by an ability to meet almost contradictory needs. Tzu Chi has a universalist ideology and has even begun to operate overseas, and yet at the same time is ostentatiously parochial as a movement by and for a little regarded cultural minority in a corner of greater China.

**Notes:**

- i. Wilson, Bryan and Dobbelaere, K., *A Time to Chant, the Soka Gakkai Buddhists in Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).
- ii. Stark, R., 'Why Religious Movements Succeed or Fail: A Revised General Model', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 1996, pp. 133-46.

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