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The Place of Socially Engaged Buddhism in China: Emerging Religious Identity in the Local Community of Urban Shanghai

Weishan Huang¹

Abstract

This article aims to analyze a realization of socially engaged Buddhism outside of Buddhist monasteries in China by using the case studies of Tzu Chi Foundation. Since the 2000s, state-led religious charities have been gradually implemented among Han Buddhist monasteries in China. With a renewal of the religious idea of “Humanistic Buddhism,” temples have set up guideline to conduct their charitable work. At the same time, Buddhist communities have become more diversified due to the international immigration of Buddhist groups. While social service is the central focus of Tzu Chi Foundation worldwide, I raise the question of how a global movement of moral reform and social service can help us rethink the normative ac-

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count of “public engagement” in a highly regulated and censored society such as China. Based on the ethnographic work, I argue the successful structural adaption of the Tzu Chi movement corresponding with, first, the promotion of socially engaged Buddhism, which aligns with state policy and interests. Secondly, the timely change of organizational missions corresponding with the shift in social identity of urban residents from “Work Units” to “Communities” in urban Shanghai.

Since the early 2000s, Han Buddhist monasteries in China have participated in state-led religious benevolent and charitable work. With the renewal of the religious idea of “Humanistic Buddhism,” temples have gradually implemented guidelines for conducting charitable work. At the same time, we have witnessed the emergence of urban voluntarism organized by religious groups in China. Yet, due to the international immigration of Buddhist groups, there are Buddhist communities in China whose social activities are not based in a monastery.

My research examines the process of localization of the Tzu Chi Foundation, a religious charitable movement. Taiwanese immigrant entrepreneurs, at the intersection of transnational migration and the global division of labor, have brought their practice of social service as members of the Tzu Chi Foundation to mainland China.² “The love crossing the ocean” (*ai cong haishang lai* 愛從海上來) was one of slogans in early stage of Tzu Chi Shanghai. While social service, or “engaged Buddhism,” is the central focus of this reformed Buddhist organization worldwide, I raise the question of how a global movement of moral reform and social

² On the early years of Tzu Chi in China, see Laliberté 2003 and 2008.

service can help us rethink the normative account of “public engagement” in a highly regulated and censored society such as China. I argue that the structural adaption of the Tzu Chi movement, such as adopting secular language to promote Buddhist ethics and integrating its social services into the local community (including both residential communities and commercial sites), has created space for the localization of the movement in a particular place, creating “community” (*shexu* 社區).

While the concept of “Humanistic Buddhism” has been widely used and promoted among mainland Chinese Buddhist communities, state and local governments, as well as by scholars for more than a century, I use the term “socially engaged Buddhism” in this article to signify the set of discourses developed out of Taixu’s Rensheng Buddhism (*taixue de renshen fojiao* 太虛的人生佛教), Yinshun’s Renjian Buddhism (*yinshun de renjian fojiao* 印順的人間佛教), and Chengyen’s Tzu Chi humanitarianism (*Zhengyan de ciji renwen* 證嚴的慈濟人文).³ Most of dominant discourse on Humanistic Buddhism in Chinese contemporary societies, such as set by Fo Guan Shang (global) or Jade Temple (Shanghai), tends to create modern religious language for secular practice. By employing the concept of “socially engaged Buddhism,” I turn my interest to a conformist group and analyze how it seeks to enact social reforms through urban volunteerism. Private religious phenomena in a conformist group may not explicitly challenge either the dominant structure or the dominant paradigms of a society. However, I am interested in learning how the appearance of such religious groups and their discourses are linked to the concerns of the wider public. Tzu Chi practitioners are part of the political community because they articulate a concern for the public good, which demands the explicit changes of secular practices. It is the

³ I use the term “socially engaged Buddhism” analytically, following the discussion and definition suggested by Main and Lai (2013).

distinction between religion and this “world” at the societal level of analysis that makes the Tzu Chi practice in general a public religion.

At the national level, the promotion of socially engaged Buddhism, such as that which the Tzu Chi Foundation espouses, aligns with state policy and interests. Institutionalization of philanthropic works was promoted by the Chinese government in 2005 under a “restoration” of Humanistic Buddhism. The state discourse of Humanistic Buddhism could be interpreted both as the recognition of the philanthropic power of Buddhism and as a way to regulate Buddhist monasteries. On the one hand, it is clear that the state intends to ensure the loyalty of Buddhist monasteries to the Communist Party and its socialist ideology; on the other hand, the state considers traditional practices of charitable giving to be insufficient and would like to enhance the social functions of the monasteries.⁴

Buddhist monasteries have long been recognized as revenue-generating entities for local governments in many places. They are popular tourist destinations and “cultural” sites. For religious organizations, being considered cultural is restrictive and less threatening to state authorities than being considered religious. However, Buddhist communities do have their own agency within this framework. Yet, as shown in Kang’s research in Sichuan, the “state’s cultural subjects compete with its modernizing agenda” (Kang 229). Some faith-based groups try to advance their missions by presenting themselves as charitable or cultural institutions to engage with contemporary social problems.

Being religious can have significant political potential for social change. Ji Zhe (2012) questioned whether Chinese Buddhism will be

⁴國宗發 [2012] 6 號 http://www.gov.cn/zwzk/2012-02/27/content_2077338.htm Accessed on Oct 10, 2015.

powerful enough to be a social force of change in China, while André Laliberté (2012) had asked whether they could be an alternate form of civility after thirty years of revival. Their answer remains negative. As I witnessed in Shanghai, most of the Buddhist communities also tend to promote their religious aims within the framework of state policies. In last twenty-five years, there are an increasing number of international faith-based groups being brought into China by immigrants. With their uncertain status, being foreign⁵ sometimes bring them a degree of legitimacy in religious practice.

The Tzu Chi Foundation,⁶ which is based on Humanistic Buddhist practice, was brought to Shanghai by transnational Taiwanese entrepreneurs in the early 1990s. Several Tzu Chi practices in China have challenged the conventional understandings of Mahāyāna Buddhist practice established since the restoration of religious practices in the late 1980s. The reform model offered by Tzu Chi includes rejecting the view of monks or nuns as passive recipients of lay offerings and discarding the importance of memorial rites (*bu jieshou gongyan, bu gan jingchan* 不接受供養, 不趕經懺). In addition, although the teachings of Tzu Chi Foundation do not publicly criticize “traditional” Han 漢 Buddhism, the practice of monastic-centered social services has brought direct challenges to the majority of Mahāyāna Buddhist temples today in Taiwan, as well as in China. Tzu Chi’s focus on spiritual cultivation in the secular world was a radical concept developed in approximately 1966 in Taiwan and directs members to engage in completely secular forms of social service as an

⁵ For the Tzu Chi Foundation, to be considered foreign is to be seen as originating from outside of China. Foreign (*jingwai*) was the term used by the informants from both Shanghai Buddhist Association and Tzu Chi leaders in describing the organizational status in China.

⁶ The Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation is the official name in Taiwan. Tzu Chi Foundation is the name registered in China as a non-governmental organization in 2008.

expression of religious cultivation. The religious discourse of Tzu Chi is one example of an internal secularization of a modern religious organization. The focus on “this world” and on “others” is central to the doctrine of Tzu Chi Buddhism, and “good deeds” are seen as more potent in creating good karma than sūtra chanting or meditation. Internal secularization in the Tzu Chi Foundation happens in four ways: by creating discursive spaces for individual education, by rendering action more important than chanting, by working on self-cultivation, and by emphasizing collective karma (Huang 129–134). This secular focus, which will be the emphasis of this article, creates the framework—both through its obstacles and opportunities—for the localization and development of Tzu Chi in China.

To date, the founder of Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation headquarters, Master Chengyen (hereafter Chengyen), has not dispatched any monastics to practice in China—or in the sixty-five other branches around the globe—as it is Chengyen’s vision to build up the foundation as a lay organization separated from Tzu Chi monastery. As such, the major leadership in China is currently in the hands of capital-linked Taiwanese immigrants and entrepreneurs. This is one of the main reasons why this lay organization was able to produce a separate social space for its growth within the manufacturing sector.

In the following section, I will first explain my research methods, followed by a brief introduction to the Tzu Chi Foundation. Based on the Tzu Chi’s declaration that it is a new kind of engaged Buddhism focused on social welfare, I will try to position the movement in Buddhist historical development, tracing it back to the reformed ideas of Taixu 太虛 in early 20th century and later Yinshun 印順. The focus of the roles of in-group (pan-Buddhist) and intergroup behavior (Tzu Chi Buddhism and non-believers) will also be discussed. Fourth, the establishment of Tzu Chi and its production of stereotypes and moral perception in China

since 1990s will be the main focus. Finally, I will contextualize the formation of the social identity of being Tzuchians in the spatial formation of residential communities in Shanghai. Therefore, I posit the place of socially engaged Buddhist in the local “community,” an emerging social space in urban Shanghai.

Research Methods

Although this article borrows the concept of social identity and tries to understand the possible social factors that can facilitate a new sense of social identity that can assist residents to cope with rapid changes of society and neighborhood, there is no intention to advance the development of social identity theories. Based on Hogg, Terry, and White, social identity theory is “a social psychological theory of intergroup relations, group processes, and the social self.” “The basic idea [of this theory] is that a social category (e.g., nationality, political affiliation, or sport team) into which one falls, and to which one feels one belongs, provides a definition of who one is in terms of the defining characteristics of the category—a self-definition that is a part of the self-concept” (Hogg, Terry, and White 1995). Could “engaged Buddhism” be a social identity for the Buddhist devotees in Shanghai that serves as a new category? If so, where is the location of implementation for the practitioners of this social group? The level of analysis is the establishment of the group (categorization), the roles of intergroup behavior, and salience of social context and identity.

To study this phenomenon, I will apply Hogg, Terry, and White’s concept of two sociocognitive processes, termed categorization and self-enhancement. According to Hogg, Terry, and White, two processes are,

[first,] The *categorization* sharpens intergroup boundaries by producing group-distinctive stereotypical and normative perceptions and actions, and assigns people, including the self, to the contextually relevant category. [Secondly,] Self-enhancement guides the social categorization process such that in-group norms and stereotypes largely favor the in-group. (1995: 260)

This article begins with a review of government documents since the 1980s. Many of the documents are named or classified as “opinions” (*yjian* 意見) and therefore serve as important political and administrative guidelines rather than as legal regulations. In order to understand how this government discourse of “guidelines” has been translated into reality, I conducted fieldwork in two Han Buddhist monasteries in Shanghai and Beijing.⁷

The main case study is the Taiwan Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation, an international lay Buddhist organization originally from Taiwan and gradually localized in China. It registered in China in 2008 as the “Tzu Chi Foundation”—the first foreign NGO in the country. My study of Tzu Chi includes Tzu Chi New York, where I conducted research as a graduate student at the New School. My fieldwork in China started in 2010. Since then, I have spent one to four months each year in in China, mainly in Shanghai, collecting data through participant observation, formal and informal interviews, and focus groups.

I have conducted research in more than ten Tzu Chi sites, and regularly observed four sites in particular. Geographically, those ten sites are located in Shanghai city, Suzhou, and Hangzhou. I am extremely fortunate to have gained the trust of my informants in Shanghai. On the

⁷ Longquan Si in Beijing and Jingan Si in Shanghai.

one hand, they accepted me when I volunteered for Tzu Chi New York, even though I was not a member or a Buddhist. On the other hand, I have, over my time spent in the field, gained the trust of my informants based on the undeserved privilege of being a Taiwanese female researcher coming from Germany, a symbolic transnational form of capital from which I ultimately benefited.

In my research of Tzu Chi, I use the local Mahāyāna Buddhist temples in Shanghai as reference groups.⁸ These temples helped me to understand the ways in which Tzu Chi, as an overseas lay movement, inhabits and negotiates with secular forms of state regulation, particularly with the recent discourse of Humanistic Buddhism in China. The research on Tzu Chi Foundation in China was mostly conducted between 2010 and 2014. The research on Mahāyāna Buddhist temples in Shanghai was started in 2015.

Tzu Chi Foundation and its Vision of Socially Engaged Buddhism

Tzu Chi teachings encourage people to act with kindness and compassion. The reformed cultivation teachings of Tzu Chi encourage one to “go into the secular world” instead of avoiding it. The purpose of engaging the secular is to enrich one’s spirituality by offering help to the needy. The teaching is to pursue spiritual gain in the secular world, and, of course, some members are hopeful about transforming that spiritual reward into material rewards.

The Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation (Tzu Chi), with its millions of members in Taiwan and overseas, is indeed the largest social group in Taiwan today, with more than 445 Tzu Chi offices in forty-five countries,

⁸ Such as Jingan Si and Yufu Chan Si.

four major missions, and four supporting missions. There are a total of 77,621 certified commissioners and faith corps⁹ members globally in thirty-four regions (Tzu Chi Fact Sheet 2012). Among them are 50,240 certified commissioners and 27,381 members of the Tzu Cheng Faith Corps.¹⁰ Commissioners and Faith Corps members are lay leaders who serve as the backbone of global missions. In China, they require at least two years of training in each local area and are certified by the Religious Bureau at the headquarters of Tzu Chi Foundation in Taiwan.

The founder, Master Chengyen, was initiated as a Buddhist nun in 1963 and was influenced by her master, Yinshun, who taught his followers to be “committed to Buddhism and to all living beings.” This reform is Chengyen’s innovation with historical inspiration. In Chengyen’s vision, her followers must also join the Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation in Taiwan if s/he intends to convert to the group. Therefore, the identity of being a devoted Buddhist is associated with the secular charitable identity of Tzuchians.¹¹

The spread and settlement of ethnic Chinese immigrants in many major cities worldwide is the significant factor behind Tzu Chi’s global network. By examining the history of the establishment of Tzu Chi centers in other cities, I discovered that the local founders, drawn from the community of local immigrants, are largely responsible for the success of

⁹ Faith corps (*cicheng* 慈誠) are formed by male commissioners. Both Commissioners and Faith Corps members are registered lay volunteers who, after two years of apprenticeship, become fundraisers for the organization, and leaders in various divisions of work in the field. Their training includes participating in Tzu Chi missions, spiritual seminars, Buddhist etiquette, the Ten Precepts of Tzu Chi, visiting the poor, and fund-raising.

¹⁰ Commissioners are lay leaders who have been certified. Faith Corps members refer to male commissioners.

¹¹ Tzu Chi members.

outreach programs and for the establishment of new missions. I constantly heard Tzu Chi commissioners mention the names of members and leaders in different cities. They knew each other from attending the same events and meetings in Taiwan as well as through interacting on the Internet. In the age of information, new technologies facilitate the process of network building.

Historical Movement in the Twentieth Century

The “Tzu Chi denomination” (*ciji zongmen* 慈濟宗門) was established in Taiwan in 2006 by Master Chengyen. She has stated in many of her public speeches that the Tzu Chi denomination followed the inspiration of Dharma Master Yinshun (hereafter Yinshun), the disciple of Master Taixu (hereafter Taixu). During the Republican Era (1912–1949), the pursuit of Buddhism for Human Life (人間佛教) was a revolutionary movement. Taixu, the Buddhist Master who first promoted Buddhism for Human Realm (*rensheng fojiao* 人生佛教), attempted a short trial implementation of his teachings in Nanjing City. Ji argues that the movement ultimately failed due to political, rather than intrinsic, factors. Taixu and others who supported Buddhist reforms maintained a close relationship with the Nationalist Party (KMT); therefore, the movement was destined to fail after the Communist Party took over China (Ji Zhao 37).

Where should we look in order to understand the social functions of socially engaged religious practice in China? Katz’s research on the social function of temple rituals stresses the importance of the study of the religious community during the Republican Era by triangulating government, local elites, and clergy.¹² Shao’s dissertation, based on an

¹² Paul Katz 康豹. “Zhongguo Dizhi Wanqi Yijiang Simiao Yishi Zai Difang Shehui De Gōngneng” 〈中國帝制晚期以降寺廟儀式在地方社會的功能〉 (“The Function of the

examination of the process of Buddhist reform during the Republican Era and a local history of reformist implementation in Nanjing, stresses the role of the ordinary lay practitioner in the process of Buddhist reform. These findings indicate that obstacles to reform include the state-mandated separation of Buddhism and folk religion, which severed both shared practices and shared spaces, thereby challenging Buddhist Associations, Buddhist education, the temple economy, and drawing some resistance from lay practitioners (Shao 136–158). Jessup examines powerful elite lay practitioners in Shanghai in 1920s and found out that Buddhist activism constituted an arena of civic culture in which urban elites were able to establish a durable source of moral authority and social legitimacy without the affiliation with monasteries (Jessup 2010).

Yinshun escaped to Hong Kong and later to Taiwan in 1952. Yinshun started publishing a series of works on the idea of Humanistic 人間 Buddhism and promoting Buddhism as social welfare. In his writing, *fo zai renjian* (佛在人間), Yinshun explained the practice of generosity¹³ and discipline for Buddhist lay people. The practices for lay practitioners enacted the offering to parents, elders, Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. He stated that people in need, such as those experiencing poverty, loneliness, or disabilities, deserve attention and care. The kind of benevolent action was the origins of being generous or offering as it developed from monetary benefits into charitable and “welfare enterprises,” in his words.¹⁴

Chinese Imperial System in the Late Period of the Monastery in the Local Society”), Fu-Shi Lin 林富士 ed, in *Zhongguo Shi Xinlun: Zongjiao Fence* 《中國史新論宗教分冊》 (*The History of Chinese Buddhism*), pp. 439–476, Taipei: Linking Publishing Co., Ltd. 台北：聯經出版事業股份有限公司. 2011.

¹³ Generosity (*bushi* 布施), which includes gift-giving and offering donations.

¹⁴ Yinshun has published a series of works on the idea of Humanistic 人間 Buddhism, promoting Buddhism as social welfare in Taiwan in *Buddha in the Human Realm* (*fo zai*

Yinshun's concept of Buddhism for the Human Realm or "for this world" gradually replaced Buddhism for Human Life (*rensheng de fojiao* 人生的佛教), and was considered a Chinese expression of engaged Buddhism, becoming the core theme of the Buddhist modernist movement in Taiwan after World War II (Ji 2013: 37). Although Chengyen avowed that she had been influenced by her mentor, Yinshun, the realization of modern welfare-focused and socially engaged Buddhism by Tzu Chi was her own creation. Below, I discuss the "comeback" of engaged Buddhism from Taiwan to China after the post-Mao Buddhist revival.

The Continuous Categorization of Worldly Buddhism

One key process of *categorization* is to continue to refine intergroup boundaries by producing group-distinctive stereotypical and normative perceptions and actions. The boundaries that the Tzu Chi organization set up first linked the group to other pan-Han Buddhist monasteries in

renjian 《佛在人間》) in pages 157, 183, 193, and 194. For example, on pages 193–194, the original language is “布施的意義何在？佛法所說的布施對象，或是可尊敬的，如孝養父母，奉事尊長，供養三寶等。或是可悲憫的，如貧窮，鰥寡，孤獨，殘廢等。以現代語來說，即慈善事業，或福利事業的布施。佛法所說的布施，意義深長，非僅財物的施捨而已，唯一般以財物為主（布施的最高意義）．．．” (What is the meaning of “offering”? The subjects of offering in Buddha Dharma are respectable, such as carrying financial duty of filial piety, serving the elders and supporting *sambo* (Buddha, Dharma and Sangha), etc.; or the people who are in need, such as poor, widowed, alone and disabled, etc. Using the modern language, it means the measures of philanthropy or charity. “Offering” in Buddhism, is meaningful. It is mainly about the donation on materials or money, but it is not the only part in offering (attaining the highest level) . . . *Bushi de yiyi hezai? Fofa suo shuo de bushi duixiang, huo shi ke zunjing de, ru xiaoyang fumu, feng shi zunzhang, gongyang sanbao deng. Huo shi ke beimin de, ru pingqiong, guan gua, gudu, canfei deng. Yi xiandai yu lai shuo, ji cishan shiye, huo fuli shiye de bushi. Fofa suo shuo de bushi, yiyi shenchang, fei jin caiwu de shishe eryl, wei yiban yi caiwu wei zhu (bushi de zuigao yiyi). . .*).

China, defining a practice as Chinese Han Buddhism. At the same time, it also separated itself from other Han Buddhist Monasteries by producing organizational distinctive images as it focused on social services that are carried out by lay leaders.

In many of the speeches of Tzu Chi's leader, Master Chengyen, she uses the terminology of the "humanitarian spirit of the Tzu Chi School."¹⁵ However, the English translation provided by Tzu Chi's official website changes the sense of the concept considerably, translating it as "The Spirit and Philosophy of Tzu Chi Movement."¹⁶ It is clear that the Tzu Chi denomination was inspired by Yinshun as well as Catholic nuns, a fact that was stated in Chengyen's biography and in many other Tzu Chi publications. The eight core missions of the Tzu Chi Foundation include charity, medicine, education, culture, international relief, bone marrow donation, environmental protection, and community volunteers, thus emphasizing social service. The emphasis on social service in the early 1970s and 1980s generated criticism from other mainstream Buddhist communities in Taiwan because some believed that Tzuchians only focused on secular social services and some criticized that Tzu Chi Foundation monopolized philanthropy. Today, there is no issue over categorizing Tzu Chi as socially engaged Buddhism; in fact, since the 1990s, the movement has successfully mainstreamed the practice in Taiwan.

In turning to the state discourse on Humanistic Buddhism in China, the institutionalization of benevolent work (*shanshi* 善事) allows the government to manage the flow of charitable funding. As Laliberté

¹⁵ *Ciji zhongmen de renwen jingsheng* 慈濟的人文精神.

¹⁶

http://tw.tzuchi.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1762%3A2009-10-07-07-06-39&catid=128%3A2009-05-10-04-55-36&Itemid=513&lang=zh Accessed on Oct 26, 2015.

had argued, the Chinese government recognized the influence of charitable works within the religious communities after the Sichuan earthquake in 2008; therefore, it introduced the concept in its regulations, setting up rules to institutionalize charitable work as part of the religious organizations, thereby declaring its benefit for the collective society and state (Laliberté 2011: 125–126.)

In 2012, the State Administration for Religious Affairs of the PRC announced its new directives for religious communities and their public welfare and charitable activities.¹⁷ This document supports religious public welfare and charitable activities as missions of religious communities using the following rationale: First, it has been a historical practice of traditional religions. Second, the general public has a higher trust in the religious community because of its symbolic capital.¹⁸ Although Tzu Chi Foundation was registered as a non-governmental organization, not a religious entity, in China, the reassurance of the state's regulation of charitable work provided a structural opportunity for the rapid development of the Tzu Chi Foundation after its official registration in 2008.

In terms of management, this document states that tax exemption, discounts on utilities, and state reimbursements could be applied to legally registered religious charitable entities. However, it was also stated that the state would determine which roles religious charitable organizations should play. They included issues of disaster relief, disabilities, childcare, elderly care, poverty, medical service, and environmental protection. In some ways, the mission of the Tzu Chi Foundation fitted well within the parameters of this state discourse.

¹⁷ *guangyu guli he guifan zongjiaojie congshi gonyi cishan huodong de yijian* 關於鼓勵和規範宗教界從事公益慈善活動的意見.

¹⁸ 國宗發 http://www.gov.cn/zwgk/2012-02/27/content_2077338.htm. Retrieved on Oct 15, 2015.

The basic forms of charitable activities were also included in the document of the State Administration for Religious Affairs, 2008, number 6. The religious organizations were encouraged to make monetary donations to the public's welfare and to set up internal charitable projects. The establishment of charitable projects and related activities, however, need to be reported to the government and relevant authorities, such as the Religious Bureau.¹⁹ The religious organizations were strongly encouraged to set up foundations to manage their special funds. I have noticed that most of the Buddhist temples in Shanghai have set up such charitable foundations. This kind of registered charitable foundation can offer tax deductions to the donors; therefore, offering these tax deductions can be, at the same time, an incentive to attract more donations.

The relationship between the Tzu Chi Foundation China and other Buddhist monasteries is competitive in recruiting members and attracting more resource. The manifestation of Tzu Chi's Humanistic Buddhist teaching in urban China took place almost twenty-five years ago²⁰, but it is only recently that it has fit into the national discourse of Humanistic Buddhism that emerged after 2008. This was the turning point for the Tzu Chi movement to appear as a grassroots movement and incorporate its cultural-religious practices into residential communities. The state-steered Humanistic Buddhist discourse has been structurally implemented in most of the major Buddhist monasteries in China today; however, I am interested in the expression of this moral reform in more secular settings, viewing it in the social context of different forms of religious revival in contemporary China.

¹⁹ The Religious Bureau was under a structural reform in March 2018.

²⁰ The first Tzu Chi public relief effort in China was in 1991.

The Establishment of Local Groups in China

In this section, I will explain how “Humanistic Buddhism” is manifested and expressed by members in their daily lives and how members recognize themselves in a contextual category of engaged Buddhism. Secondly, I inquire as to how socialization in Tzu Chi teaching could lead members to continue building this social categorization and favor the stereotype of engaged Buddhism in the form of Tzu Chi. The example I will use focuses on the shift of Tzu Chi mission from company-based semi-community centers to the residential community-based centers.²¹ The focus of social service not only defines the main feature of Tzuchians, but also determines the necessity of establishing “public” sites.

There were twenty-nine Tzu Chi branches and 1,357 commissioners (commissioners and faith corps²²) in Mainland China by 2012. As a pioneer in bringing Tzu Chi to Shanghai, Sister Chiou has faced harassment, interrogation, and short periods of detention by the government. At least, this was her story in 1998. Between 1998 and 2008, Tzu Chi Buddhist members worshipped as a group in the Still Thought (*Jinshi*) Hall inside of their factories and companies. This took place after they were harassed a few times by local police and “Taiban”²³ officers when they had house gatherings. Because they were the bosses of their respective firms, they found greater freedom in the private business sector. When religious groups cannot freely express their practices in the public sphere, they bring them into the private sector and private space.

²¹ *Xiaoqu* 小區 could be translated into the residential community, residential unit or residential quarter.

²² Faith corps are formed by male commissioners. In China in 2012 there were 1,081 registered female commissioners and 276 faith corps.

²³ Officers from Taiwan Affairs Office (*Taiwan shiwu banshichu* 台灣事務辦事處).

My informants in Shanghai include Sister Chiou, whose office is in Putuo district; Brother M, in Jiading district; Brother W, in Jingan district; Sister Mei, in Baoshan district; Sister H, in Pudong district; and Brother H, in Minhang district. They are all Taiwanese entrepreneurs who have employed their company spaces to shelter their religious events for years. They host both Buddhist study groups and Buddhist festivals in the manufacturing and office spaces. My earlier fieldwork on this transnational religious movement led me to discover how, first, immigrant entrepreneurs used their economic power to shadow religious practice before they gained legal status in 2008. People are practicing religion despite the risk of losing their businesses. Secondly, even after gaining “legal” status, they still have to practice their beliefs in a hidden way, within small groups, as the legal registration of non-governmental organization only granted the permission for social service but not religious practices.

In the 1990s, Tzu Chi practices in China have demonstrated the intertwining of economic space and underground religio-cultural sites. Thus, the Tzu Chi centers built within manufacturing companies becomes both places of producing commodities and reproducing spirituality. The factories are places within the territory of the private sector, but also places to conceal and protect civil organizations. Therefore, in the case of Tzu Chi, reindustrialization in the Shanghai region can be interpreted as the creation and conjunction of industrial and religious spatiality.

Since Tzu Chi has received legal status as the first “foreign” NGO registered in China in 2008, its activities have been open to non-Taiwanese. The appearance of this transnational religious teaching has attracted many local practitioners to engage in religious volunteerism. In 2014, I witnessed the shift of space for missions to a focus on residential communities (*xiaoqu* 小区). I learned from my high-profile inform-

ants that they were “instructed” by headquarters in Taiwan to implement Tzu Chi missions in the communities and focus on environmental protection. The following are cases studies in different districts.

When I first visited Sister Mei in Baoshan district in Shanghai in 2010, she utilized her self-owned construction company to hold Tzu Chi events. She has converted her daytime company storefront space into a gathering space for all Tzu Chi activities in that district. Sister Mei is the first commissioner who has successfully brought the Tzu Chi environmental protection mission into the residential community (*xiaoqu*)²⁴. She has been consistently seeking opportunities in the residential community to promote Tzu Chi’s events. After tireless efforts of attempting to persuade the residential committee (*Quwei Hui* 居委會)²⁵ to accept her community, she was finally granted approval. “That party leader (*shuji* 書記) must be a Buddhist. But he could not admit it because he is a Communist Party member who is not permitted to believe in any religion.” She was overwhelmed with the approval and showed me her new designs of devices for the environmental protection campaigns. They were plastic holders to display Tzu Chi banners and hold up oversized bags to collect recycled items.

Every second Sunday, fifty to seventy-five volunteers, including a few commissioners, gather in Mei’s office center. They prepare to divide into four groups for different locations. One is close to the subway station and three are in the residential communities. Each campaign is organized together with the party leader in the residential committee (*Quwei Hui* 居委會). After volunteers set up the booth and hold up their banners, they play loud music and dance to attract attention. Some stand

²⁴ Residential communities are residential units/quarters in urban China.

²⁵ *Shequ Jumin Weiyuanhui* 社區居民居委會 can be translated as community committee, neighborhood committee, or residents’ committee.

next to the booth and some spread out to distribute a small number of folded leaflets. When I asked why the leaflets were produced in such a small number, Mei said that Tzuchians should not create more trash from their environmental campaigns. I later found out that Tzuchians also tended to keep a low profile in the neighborhood. In addition, religious content is banned from appearing in the flyers.

As with the environmental campaign, all of the events within the residential communities need approval from the residential committee. Before the Lunar New Year, Tzuchians will visit senior centers in the neighborhood and distribute rice. Each year, commissioners also donate scholarships to a university in the neighborhood.

By 2010, community residents could easily spot Tzuchians' gatherings on Tuesday and Thursday nights in this company-based center because of the music and the crowds. In 2012, the office was completely converted into a Tzu Chi local center with clearly Tzu Chi-style interior design elements. Mei had moved the office rooms to the second floor. The ground level had been converted into a Tzu Chi center. The wall dividing the center space and the arcade had been knocked down because of the demand for more gathering space. The sight of sixty people singing and dancing is enough to make passersby stop to watch the attraction.

The increased indigenization of membership has been rapid. Most of the new converts are local Chinese (Huang 130). The religious teaching has translated into grassroots education among Chinese. In less than two years, not only have more local Chinese members converted to Tzu Chi, but they have also emerged as core volunteers in this center. Mei's mission focused on residential communities has started seeing positive results. When I returned in 2014, I was surprised to see that Mei's group had relocated to a larger space within a two-story building and had formally established a Tzu Chi Center that is a five-minute drive

away. Mei's group started and developed within the residential community (*xiaoqu*); however, they could not find a bigger "public" space for their gatherings within any residential community. Relocation seems inevitable when such a group continues to grow.

The purpose of this new center is not only for group events, such as study groups and public talks, but also for the storage of recycling materials collected from the nearby residential community. The construction of a new center was self-financed because this Tzu Chi center is part of a neighborhood senior center where the land does not belong to Tzu Chi.

In my first visit to this newly established center at 4 p.m. during a weekday, I met a group of young volunteers meeting to plan a large event, just around the time that members from the neighboring senior center had finished their daily worship and returned to the center. Once the elderly left, young volunteers gathered to prepare for the evening event, including organizing and recording events, inviting speakers, and composing reports. In the kitchen, volunteers from nearby residential communities were cooking for more than seventy people and the director of the neighboring senior center came by to donate her fried rice and soup dishes. Around 5 p.m., the gate separating the Tzu Chi Center and the senior center was closed while another gate between the Tzu Chi Center and the street was opened to welcome event attendees.

On the night of my first visit, Mei was chairing a weekly study group with more than eighty percent of attendees being women. The event started with a vegetarian dinner. Only five Taiwanese commissioners were present to support the event as speakers and sign language instructors. Chinese college students sat at two tables. This new constituency marks the center's membership since 2012, revealing the indigenization of Tzu Chi membership.

Another example of shift of mission space is in Xuehui district, a central commercial area of Shanghai. There I met Sister Mi in a Tzu Chi public talk. She was a Taiwanese immigrant entrepreneur who that evening as a trainee speaker was attempting to convince the audience about the critical need for environmental protection in China today. One of reasons that she was a trainee was because she had relatively little Taiwanese accent in her Mandarin, making her lecture more comprehensible to local members. After I introduced myself to her, she invited me to join the upcoming recycling event for the following weekend. I later learned from the interview that there were new instructions from Tzu Chi Taiwan that Shanghai Tzuchians should refocus all of their missions in their residential communities.

These direct instructions from Hualian headquarters in Taiwan stated that all of the care and concerns for society should return to where Tzuchians live. The declaration made great sense. It encouraged Tzuchians to care about people with whom they live closely and share similar concerns about their environment. Another reason for this new declaration was because the Chinese government began to restrict large events in recent years. The tension finally came to a head during the 2013 winter relief campaign in Jiangsu province, when, Tzuchians attempting to distribute winter relief supplies were warned by the Chinese government to break down the crowd of a thousand people into three groups in three separate locations.

When I arrived at the location given by Sister Mi fifteen minutes early, I noticed that I was standing in front of a Residential Committee in a residential community (*xiaoqu*) in Xu district. Sister Mi explained that a newly converted member, living in this *xiaoqu*, successfully convinced the party leader to work together with Tzuchians for the recycling campaign. Once the Tzuchian coordinators arrived, they moved all of their banners and displays from inside of the Residential Committee office.

The Tzuchian volunteers deposited their backpacks in the office while we were collecting and organizing the recycling project outside. The washroom was also open to Tzu Chi members during the event. About ninety-five percent of the fifty volunteers wore grey Tzuchi uniforms, which meant most of them were in training. It was easy to differentiate those who were commissioners and those who were trainees or volunteers.

On the same morning, one residential building coordinator (*lou-zhang* 樓長) brought in a lot of recycling that she had accumulated for days. With a big smile, she said that she had woken up early to collect recycling items from trash cans before the street recycling vendors got to them. It seemed to be a common way for some members to collect items and bring them to the campaign site, where they organized them in open space. The collectivity of members in public space had demonstrated the command and solidarity of Tzu Chi members.

Commissioners in various districts have also reorganized their manpower and focused their services in the local districts. In Huangpu district, the volunteers held their event of trash recycling in the evening in Xizhang South Road, the center of the district. While passersby are in a hurry to rush home around 7 p.m., Tzu Chi volunteers are busy with recycling on the side of the road. The reason for the evening recycling is that most of the volunteers are young and have day jobs. Evening recycling (*yejian huanbao* 夜間環保) has become a routine. This socially engaged Buddhism also is a source of urban identity for residents who have worked and lived within urban time frames and spaces.

According to Hogg, Terry, and White, “depersonalization of self is the basic process underlying group phenomena” (Hogg, Terry, and White 261). Taiwanese bosses (Taiwanese entrepreneurs), such as Mei and Mi, in Shanghai were the initial members and leadership in Tzu Chi Shanghai in 1990s. They were socialized by group norms of Tzu Chi

Foundation to being self-effacing (縮小自己) and unpretentious while they were in the group; therefore, their unique class and ethnic status was transformed into collective behavior, as we see in the case of Tzuchians' environmental work. As more and more local Chinese converted to the group, they also enhanced themselves through learning and the shared norms of Tzu Chi teaching. They rapidly socialized themselves through training classes and local activities, and also quickly took over the leadership in the local projects. Not only group cohesion has been established through depersonalization, but the process of mutual influence has been exhibited in recent projects focusing on residential communities.

Joining a voluntary association and wearing the uniforms (polo shirt and white pants as the visual identity marker of Tzu Chi people) is a way of self-enhancing and developing a social identity. Attending training session and community events are the method of socializing newly converted local residents. Being model residents is to be aware of their social responsibility for the environment. The group of also produces distinctive moral discourse and methods of realizing social services. Tzu Chi social services, unique uniforms, and collective mobilization create a prototypical model of being modern religious citizens in a secular realm. Those actions bring pride and a sense of altruism to newly converted members. The sense of affiliation also continues to distinguish Tzu Chi members from other socially inactive or disengaged Buddhists affiliated with Buddhist monasteries as well as non-believers.

Organizational Reform of the Tzu Chi Foundation Worldwide

The focus in this section is to understand the shift in members' behavior. In 2006, there was a structural reform, known as "Four in One" (*siheyi* 四合一) within the Tzu Chi Foundation in Taiwan. The reform was gradual-

ly implemented in overseas branches, including China in 2014. The fundamental nature of the reform is to integrate social service within the communities. The reform was a response to the rapid growth of the Tzu Chi Foundation worldwide. It stresses the mutual cooperation and mobilization within communities. When I left New York in 2009, I noticed that the reform has created a clash between the nature of members' friendships and bonding and the division of Tzu Chi's jurisdictions. A similar situation happened in Shanghai.

The "Four in One" (*siheyi* 四合一) reform is a way to integrate the junior members in missions without feeling left out in a big organization. Almost all of the senior members repeated the reform motto to me when I asked about "Four in One": "The reform is to work together like concentric circles. We all have to assist each other and integrate Tzu Chi services with our own communities. The reform of the new system is that junior members can be appointed as event planners (*heqiheqi* 和氣) and the senior members have to work as the rank-and-file members (*xieli* 協力)." ²⁶

It is not simply a concern over efficient mobilization. Sister Mi told me, "we 'have to' integrate our services with our own communities (*huigui shequ* 回歸社區)," which was a clear instruction from the headquarters in Hualian City, Taiwan.²⁷

We were instructed to care for the issues within our neighborhoods; so, at this moment, we could only focus on environmental protection. We, Tzuchians, also like to contribute to other cultural events, such as flower arrangement and public talks, in our residential communi-

²⁶ The functional group of Tzu Chi Foundation.

²⁷ A conversation with the informant, sister Mi, in 2014.

ties, but this is not permitted by residential Committee yet. There is no *Shunyuan* 順緣 (opportune conditions) yet.

Another instruction about integrating with the community (*huigui shequ* 回歸社區) from Hualian headquarters was to push forward the process of leadership localization. I will discuss this issue and how it overlapped with the creation of niches within residential communities.

Characterizing “*Shequ*”

When I asked Tzuchians in Shanghai what the “community” (*shequ*) means to them, I always received different answers. Many Chinese members replied that it is “*xiaoqu*,” the residential communities. Some Taiwanese members described it as neighborhoods, and some said grassroots groups. All of the staff working within Chinese Buddhist monasteries would immediately refer to the term “*Jiedao*,” the Subdistrict Office.²⁸ This term represents a new concept for many people during the process of urban restructuring, but it was also a category in political management for more than half a century in urban China.

In the second half of the Twentieth Century, the Chinese government shifted its urban control from the division of Municipal district to the Work Unit and then later to the Residential Community.²⁹ After 1949, there were three waves of reform of political divisions. In the

²⁸ Both *Jiedao banshichu* or *Jiedao Ban* refer to a Subdistrict administrative agency.

²⁹ Hua, Wei 華偉. “Danweizhì Xiang Shequzhi De Huigui—Zhongguo Chengshi Jiceng Guanli Tizhi 50 Nian Bianqian” 單位制向社區製的回歸-中國城市基層管理體制 50 年變遷 (From Unit System to Community System—50 Years of the Changes for the Strategy and Management of Urban Management in Basic Level in China), pp. 86–99. *Zhanlue Yu Guanli* 戰略與管理. 2000.

1950s, the municipal level was the basis of control that extended from the district level to the street level. The unit system had extended from the military and political administrations to state-owned businesses and collective enterprises. This was the establishment of the “unit society.” In the 1960s and 1970s, there was a two-way process established in the so-called unitization of community and the communalization of the unit. In the 1980s and 1990s, the fading of the Work Unit in the urban area had rapidly created a new sense of anomie. Although politically, the Subdistrict Office (*jiedao bangongshi*) has replaced the functions of the traditional work unit, city inhabitants sense the transformation of different organizational affiliations in their lives. The Residential Committee is the latest entity of the government to distribute welfare and allocate social control to individuals. However, city inhabitants are no longer strongly associating themselves with either the work unit or the residential community as their primary identity.

In the new regulations released in February 2016, the central government issued a plan of urban development which provides the opportunity for Tzu Chi to bring their missions into residential communities.³⁰ *Shequ* and *xiaoqu* are, again, stressed as the basic unit for the implementation of new policies, such as the development of a green community and the issue of garbage reductions. Tzu Chi volunteers in Shanghai have experience on issues of recycling and garbage reduction. Another new regulation is that a residential community must be open for the public use. A policy might potentially open a new social space for social groups.

³⁰ *Zhonggong zhongyan guanyu jingyibu jiachang chengshi guihua jianshe guanli gongzuo de ruogan yijian* 中共中央關於進一步加強城市規劃建設管理工作的若干意見 http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2016-02/21/content_5044367.htm. Retrieved on August 1, 2016.

The Gains and Challenges of New Social Space

Tzu Chi networks, as a transnational religious movement, created local spaces and projects within practitioners' residential areas, yet at the same time they linked members together through a new belief system which connects them to a program of global moral reform. In addition to these functions, this faith-based movement also provides another layer of identity for urban inhabitants.

“Integrating with the community” represented a shift of organizational development in 2014. The challenge of large-scale distributions in the countryside has attracted a good deal of attention from the Chinese government. Civil groups like Tzu Chi also cannot compete with the capacity of the military in domestic disaster relief. Refocusing missions in the urban residential community seems to be a tactical shift. At the same time, the opening up to the urban residential community serves as a niche opportunity as well. Caring for members' neighborhoods has created a new mission audience and a new social space for urban Tzuchi-ans.

The shift in mission is not only about space but also about diversifying the leadership in ethnic terms. “Relay,” known as the concept of localization among Tzu Chi's membership and leadership in China, is part of a long-term plan for Tzu Chi Headquarters. The idea is to have local members, local Chinese, becoming the leaders of their own residential communities. The Chinese volunteers have been appointed as the group leaders (*zuzhang* 組長) for monthly environmental protection days since 2014, such as in Baoshan, Jiading, and Xuhui districts.

For example, in Baoshan and Xuhui districts, the group leaders have known their neighbors better than Taiwanese immigrants. Some of

them are even building leaders (*louzhang* 樓長) in their residential communities; therefore, they know the residents in their buildings and have easy access to talk to potential “recycling materials” donors. One leader told me that she had been cooking breakfast at home and inviting her neighbors to enjoy the meal before the recycling events started. One leader who is also a building leader in Xuhui told me that she had been collecting all of the materials from her building and bringing them to the district recycling event. The creation of recycling events in the community has created new social space for volunteers to meet their neighbors and establish new connections with them, translating Buddhist ethics into secular language.

In the eyes of senior Taiwanese commissioners, the intention of reform would mobilize of member workforce within the same districts. The long distance required to travel to events was dangerous for overworked members and was not considered a “green” practice. Besides recycling, the visit to senior centers and children hospitals in each district is also considered part of Tzu Chi local missions. Every week, there are study groups held in the various companies within the districts. Since volunteers are district residents, it is much easier for them to travel back-and-forth to the district events. Volunteers believe this is putting their idea of carbon reduction into real action in daily life. The process of integrating the services into the community has also established a new identity based on their residential space, corresponding with the municipal jurisdictions. Tzu Chi members also refer to themselves, for example, as the “Xuhui Tzuchians,” with the membership affiliation with Xuhui district.” The successful localization of leadership with the organization is partially facilitated by the tactics of integrating missions with the local community.

Two challenges have emerged in the process of integrating Tzu Chi services in the community. Since the emphasis of Tzu Chi missions is

social services, or engaged Buddhism, they must work with residential committees in the community. For example, the environmental protection groups in Baoshan and Xuhui have been working closely with their residential committees in recent year, which offers volunteers access to use the open and indoor spaces in the community. However, once the services have become public, the recycling materials accumulate rapidly. The missions will require a stable source of space for recycling classification and temporary storage.

In 2014 and 2015, Sister Mi frequently mentioned the difficulty in finding a stable source of space to set up the district community center for recycling efforts in a way similar to practices in Taiwan. Since Xuhui district is a central advertising commercial district, “no one wants to live next to an environmental protection and recycling center,” Mi said. When I ask where they store all of the collections, Mi replied, “All of the organized items were later shipped to the regional center in Shanghai because of a lack of storage space.” I asked Mi how the regional center, which was also located in the center of Shanghai, accommodated the collections from all of the districts. She replied that sometimes they would sell some cardboard to street recycling vendors after their morning campaign in order to help with shipping costs and save storage space in the regional center. Once a month, all of the Buddhist environmental protection volunteers would gather on the roof of the regional center to organize items contributed from all of the district centers. On one morning in 2014, there were about five hundred of them working on the roof.

Another challenge is the clash of members’ friendships and the division of community-based service. Communities are divided by municipal jurisdiction. However, most of members joined Tzu Chi through introductions by their friends; therefore, new members continued to attend events with the encouragement and in the company of their friends. There was some resistance when members were reassigned to

district groups based on their residential districts, not their friendship preferences.

Sister Lan was a Chinese member still in the status of a trainee. When we met the second time in a workshop in the regional office, she told me that she brought three new friends to attend Tzu Chi events. “They had to travel three hours one way to come to this office. It usually took more than three hours for them to come to our district office in Baoshan District for events.” When I asked if they would consider attending events in Jiading district since it might be closer to them, Sister Lan replied, “they only follow me to events because we are good friends. They are not familiar with others yet.”

I heard a similar narrative in Xuhui district. One commissioner complained about how the committee members in Baoshan district took away a new member first under her supervision. “They reassigned that new member to Baoshan district because of her residential location. But I recruited her and I was her hen (*muji* 母雞, or godmother). The commissioners in Baoshan district are too restrictive to her and didn’t give her a fair chance of promotion [as a commissioner].” The registration of membership or donorship in one district also indicates where the member will pay her or his monthly donation. Although this clash continues, I have observed a positive relationship between the growth of local membership and the implementation of community-based services. At the very least, I have witnessed the succession of leadership among low-ranking local members.

Conclusion: Tzu Chi’s Structural Adaption to the Residential Community

This article aimed to study the successful structural adaption of the Tzu Chi movement corresponding with the shift in social identity from

“Work Units” to “Communities” in urban Shanghai. Tzu Chi practices have been accepted by local social networks and implemented in residential communities under the permission of the local state. This emerging social identity is a voluntary one.

As Hogg, Terry, and White argue, “categorization of the self and other into in-group and out-group defines people’s social identity and accentuates their perceived similarity to people’s cognitive representation of the defining features of the group” (260). One key characteristic of being a Tzu Chi practitioner is a voluntary social identity, which is different from an assigned state category. Members further identified themselves based on district differentials. When I asked Tzu Chi members who they are, they always answer with their names followed by their districts: “I am a Changning Tzuchian.” “I am a Putuo Tzuchian.” (Changning and Putuo are district names.) The affiliation with district is territorial-based and community-focused. When one asked about their local project, members would start listing their activities in such places as their residential communities and senior centers. Members perceive and enact themselves as Tzu Chi prototypes rather than as unique individuals.

They wore blue polo shirts and white pants, volunteering as relief workers in the 1991 flood in East China, which was the first large disaster relief in the country. Every year, Tzuchians still hold their winter relief campaign in rural areas just as they have been doing for the past 25 years. Tzu Chi is also one of the very few non-profit organizations staying in Sichuan for community rebuilding efforts ten years after the earthquakes in that region. Those are the sites of socially engaged Buddhism in China today. As I mentioned earlier, the expression of Tzu Chi’s humanitarian Buddhist teachings in urban China has fit well into the national discourse of promoting Humanistic Buddhism (*Renjian fojiao*) after 2008. Tzuchians are also conscious about how their practices fit in with

the statist discourse of societal building, such as environmental protection and building the harmonious society.

However, in 2014, by responding to the institutional project of integrating service with community, the Tzu Chi movement has been localized by the increasing growth in Chinese membership and the creation of “relatively” grassroots spaces for the realization of socially engaged Buddhism. The structural adaption of Tzu Chi to the residential communities has advanced the process of its localization in urban China. By using secular language and engaging in environmental protection, Tzuchians are able to act on the ethic of reformed Buddhism in highly regularized and controlled urban spaces. Traveling to rural areas is no longer the only expression of their social engagement.

The cooperation between Tzuchians and the local authority of the Residential Committee is one of the factors supporting the localization of Tzu Chi. While I was witnessing the successful projects undertaken in some residential communities in Shanghai and Beijing, I shared the concerns of some commissioners. They worried that one day the change of policy at the national and local levels of the government might alter their efforts. But for now, it is “the community Dharma field” (*shequ fujian* 社區福田) that they need to cultivate. I am not claiming those spaces are the only places for socially engaged Buddhism, but they are the ones that are evolving.

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