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Philanthropy and the Religious Life of Goodness in China

Robert P. Weller, C. Julia Huang, and Keping Wu

Religious philanthropy in both Taiwan and Mainland China suddenly expanded in the 1980s. The previous two decades had seen almost nothing that might count as religious philanthropy, especially in any institutionalized way. Mainland China at that time had no charitable religious non-governmental organizations, no religious hospitals, no religiously organized poverty or emergency relief programs, and no religious-sponsored schools. Taiwan was the same except for a handful of Christian schools and hospitals that had been founded in the late nineteenth century or had relocated to Taiwan after the civil war. Two of Taiwan's most important Buddhist charitable groups – Tzu Chi and Buddha Light – began in the 1960s, but both only achieved island-wide prominence in the 1980s, and global prominence even later.

The rapid pace of change that began in the 1980s continues to the present. This chapter addresses what happened in both Taiwan and the Mainland to allow such rapid and recent growth, in spite of the enormous political differences between the two places. We will argue that the change partly represents a return to an earlier understanding of religions and charity – what some have called desecularization (Berger, 1999) or post-secularism (Habermas, 2008) – enabled by changes in politics, economy, and

communication that affected both places. Yet it is also partly something quite new: a form of “industrialized philanthropy.”¹

From Embedded Charity to Secularism to Industrialized Religious Philanthropy

Talking about religious charity in Chinese societies before the twentieth century can be misleading, because charity, religion, the state, and social organizations were so thoroughly intertwined in the past. The Confucian tradition from the beginning had stressed the state’s responsibility to care for the welfare of its people, and this general sense of the state’s duty never disappeared. Formal religious groups began to offer charitable services at least by the Liang Dynasty (late fifth century AD), often under imperially sponsored Buddhism (Leung, 2001). Even by the Song Dynasty (960-1279), which encouraged direct state control over charity, many of the nominally state-run charitable groups were in fact Buddhist monasteries or were led by monks (Fuma, 2005, p. 39).

By the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, the situation had evolved further, but religion, state, and charity remained closely linked. Beginning in the Ming, benevolent halls (*shantang*) became important vehicles for charity. Usually run by local elites citing Confucian and Buddhist inspiration, these groups provided services from soup kitchens to life-boat brigades, as part of an expansion of religious concerns beyond

¹ The analysis that follows is based on fieldwork conducted by the authors for various lengths of time between 2006 and 2014. The primary site in Taiwan was Lukang although we also draw on experience elsewhere; on the Mainland most of the research was conducted in Suzhou and its environs. A much more detailed discussion of these issues is available in Weller, Huang and Wu (Weller et al., 2017).

care for the dead to help for the living.² They were trying to bring broader moral concerns to projects of social improvement.

In addition to their broader social and political embedding, we also want to emphasize that many of these groups were dedicated to moral causes that differ a great deal from what modern charities do (although there was also overlap, of course). These differences can be seen, for example, in societies to free captive fish and animals, to collect and respectfully burn scraps of paper with writing on them, and to support widows who refused to remarry. We will also revisit this below, but want to stress here that what counts as moral behaviour – the good – has varied over time and space.

All kinds of groups carried out charity for their members, even if their primary purpose was something else. In addition, such social groups nearly always had a religious aspect. That is, social organizations were just as intertwined with religion and charity as the imperial state. For example, in nineteenth-century Lukang, Taiwan, the primary form of institutionalized social organization was the “god-worshipping association” (*shenming hui*). Trade guilds, rotating credit associations, and even lineages took that form, centred around an altar to gods.³ They all also offered charity to their members. Of the sixty-six god-worshipping associations recorded in a Japanese census of 1923, the Guild of Quanzhou Traders (*Quanjiao*) is the only one that still survives today (Xu, 2000, pp. 211–242). On entering their guild hall, the first thing one sees is their god altar, which is also featured in the historical brochure they publish (*Quanjiao Jianjie [Introduction to the Quanzhou Guild]*,

² For one example from Ming Hankow, see Rowe (1992, pp. 91–186). For a more general discussion, see Fuma (Fuma, 2005).

³ See Sangren (1984) on god-worshipping associations as a Qing legal mechanism. For Lukang, see Huang (2000, p. 163).

1995). Their guiding purpose in the nineteenth century, when Lukang was still one of Taiwan's major trading ports, was to control trade with Quanzhou on the mainland. Nevertheless, they also built bridges and roads, contributed to temple construction, settled disputes, and donated food to the poor. They were typical of the situation across China and Taiwan at the beginning of the twentieth century: religion, charity, and broader social and political life could not easily be separated from each other.

This changed, however, beginning in the late nineteenth century and then at a faster pace during the first half of the twentieth century. China became far more exposed to global influences at this time through trade, law, warfare, education, Christian missions, and other forms of contact. The missionary turn toward charity at the end of the nineteenth century was one important influence on how such work would come to be shaped over the following decades, and so was the spread of international philanthropic organizations, from the Red Cross to the Rotary Club.

One response to this by the early twentieth century was the rise of large new, pan-Chinese religious groups dedicated to charity, which Duara calls redemptive societies (Duara, 2001; Goossaert and Palmer, 2011, p. 79). Outgrowths of the earlier benevolent halls and popular religious movements, these groups tended to be religiously syncretic, sectarian, and deeply involved with philanthropy. They thrived on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, even though Taiwan fell under Japanese occupation in 1895. The World Red Swastika Society, for example, was set up as an Asian equivalent of the Red Cross (substituting the Buddhist swastika for the Christian cross), but also undertook other kinds of universalist activities like setting up Esperanto schools. The group was founded in 1921

as an offshoot of a syncretic spirit-writing group called Daoyuan, and claimed 7-10 million members by 1937 (Duara, 2001, pp. 117–118).

At the same time as these groups began to thrive, both relevant governments (the Republican state in China after 1911 and the Japanese empire in Taiwan after 1895) embarked on secularist projects inspired largely by European and American constitutional models of separation of church and state. Both accepted the broad secularist agenda, although Japan was closer to a German model, with its state-sponsored Shinto, and China closer to the French model, with a strict separation. Separating religion and state, of course, also meant creating the category of “religion” for the first time, thus beginning the process of disembedding religion from social and political life. While these were not anti-religious projects, they completely transformed the religious field by pushing groups to be purely religious, and by defining some activities as so hopelessly non-modern that they could only be dismissed as superstition.

That is why a spirit-writing, moralizing group like Daoyuan would create a separate identity as the secular World Red Swastika Society. Under pressure from the Republican state, many similar groups also reworked themselves as secular charities before finally being repressed completely under the Communists. In Taiwan under the Japanese these groups fared a little better, but we can see the same process at work in the fate of god-worshipping associations. Immediately after conducting their census in 1923, the Japanese ended the legal status of such associations; social groups could no longer legally organize around altars. At least legally, religion was thus uprooted from the daily life of social institutions and separated into its own world of the spiritual.

State promotion of a secularist vision continued in Taiwan after the island came under Republican rule in 1945, and strengthened much more on the mainland after the Communist takeover there in 1949. Redemptive societies came under attack almost immediately there, and were completely dismantled during the 1950s. Those religions with official recognition were required to limit themselves only to “religious” activities – that is, not charity – and even those largely ceased in public during the 1960s. Taiwan was not as repressive, but the continuation of Republican policies meant that religions there too usually did little beyond the walls of their temples and churches.

By the 1980s, however, this situation changed quickly in both places. This was true across the significant political differences that separated them, and true also across the religious differences of Buddhism, Christianity, and temple worship (the main cases we discuss here). The beginnings in both places were small charitable activities at the grassroots. This started earlier in Taiwan, but only in the 1980s did groups like Tzu Chi and Buddha Light really begin to take off. On the mainland, small temples began to undertake ad hoc charity in the early 1980s. The first large NGO with religious connections (Amity Foundation) began in the middle of that decade, followed by the first Buddhist one (Shaolin Charity and Welfare Foundation) in 1994.

This newly thriving religious philanthropy takes many forms, but much of it falls under the rubric of what we will call industrialized philanthropy. We use this term to indicate three primary characteristics: (1) operation on a scale much larger than anything before the twentieth century, sometimes involving millions of people acting in dozens of countries; (2) procedures driven by bureaucratic concerns for rationalization, efficiency, and auditability; and (3) a disembedding from local social life and personal connections

accompanied by a new emphasis on the autonomous individual driven to volunteer through cosmopolitan ideals of civic responsibility. Why did these particular kinds of changes happen at this historical moment?

On both sides of the Taiwan Strait, political decisions were part of the explanation. Taiwan in the 1980s was beginning to democratize after decades of authoritarian rule where the state had tried to limit the influence of independent social groups, but had itself taken only very limited responsibility for welfare. Instead, it stressed the family's responsibility for such things. When groups like Tzu Chi began to pick up the burden, just at the moment when the state was beginning to relax its control, they found themselves welcomed by the state; soon all kinds of religious groups saw this as an opportunity. On the Chinese mainland, the state was also making a little more room available for independent social life after the Cultural Revolution. Unlike Taiwan, the high socialist Chinese state had wanted to monopolize all welfare responsibilities, but by the 1980s it began urging social groups to take up some of this responsibility; religious organizations were among the first to move into this new space. The following section will discuss these political changes and the contemporary role of the state in shaping religious charity.

Not all the important influences were political, however. Both places experienced rapid economic growth during that period, and one result was that new money began flowing into religious groups as people could afford to donate more. In addition, major technological changes in communication of all kinds had important effects at the time. Improvements in transportation and lowered restrictions on international movement in both places encouraged the spread of people and ideas. Much of Tzu Chi's global expansion (including to the Mainland), for example, has been made possible only by the increased

mobility of Taiwanese followers. At the same time, the rise of the Internet and electronic social media has greatly eased the flow of information. These changes encouraged many people to imagine themselves in new ways, partly as consumers in a flourishing market, and partly as cosmopolitan citizens, who can be fans of French wine, American metal music, and Korean soap operas, while never leaving their home towns. Later sections address these new ideas of “civic selving” and the related reconceptualization of what “goodness” can mean.

Political Merit-Making

Merit-making is a Buddhist concept, referring to lay people’s gift-giving to the sangha in order to practice detachment from wealth. In its popularized usage in China, merit-making involves a hierarchical and reciprocal relationship. The receiving end occupies a higher status by helping the giver to achieve merit, while the giver relies on the recipient as a source of legitimacy and perhaps salvation. The term is now widely used in Chinese societies well beyond religious contexts, and we thus find it natural to extend the concept by thinking about “political merit-making” as a way to characterize the relationships between religious philanthropy and various governments, and to describe the ways religious groups can gain legitimacy, political support and room to pursue their own agendas from the state. In some cases, religious groups can even influence policy-making through political merit-making.

All religious organizations practice political merit-making in their social service provision regardless of whether they have an active political agenda or not. For instance, the Buddhist charity Tzu Chi maintains a distance from formal politics, but still makes political merit by sharing the burden of social welfare provision with the state. Its ability to

deliver public goods in an efficient manner makes the state reliant on the group. We argue that political merit-making exists in both Taiwan and Mainland China, in spite of the very large political differences between them. However, as we will show, the form of political merit-making is "defensive" in contemporary China, but "collaborative" in Taiwan after democratization.

In contemporary China, religious groups often make merit by participating in economic and political activities that also advance the state's agenda. During the early 1980s many religious sites that were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution were reconstructed under government initiatives in order to generate revenue through tourism. Later, many overseas Chinese businessmen who donated to temple reconstruction (often through kinship ties) became the main investors in newly started industrial enterprises. This benefitted both local governments and religious organizations, many of which became the large thriving religious charities of today. Other religious groups, especially Buddhist ones, provided informal diplomacy with Taiwan or countries in Southeast Asia. This kind of political merit-making was defensive, because contributing to the state's agenda was the only way to protect and advance their religious interests.

Most of today's thriving religious charities are based on organizations that were rebuilt in the early 1980s. For instance, the Amity foundation was founded in 1985 with funds largely from overseas Protestants. Initially a Bible printing organization that also brought English teachers to China, it has now become the largest religious NGO in China and is deeply involved with charity. Political merit-making is key to its success. Not only does it collaborate heavily with all levels of the Chinese government on its projects, it has also become the window through which the world positively perceives the state of

Protestantism in China. By making merit to the state, it remains the only legal Bible printing company in China, hence the largest one in the world.

Hanshan Temple, the most successful Buddhist charity in Jiangsu Province, was among the first temples reconstructed in Suzhou after the Cultural Revolution. Initially it became an important tourist site, attracting large groups of tourists (especially those from Japan) and generating revenue for the local government. Under the former abbot Xingkong, it also became an important channel of informal diplomacy with neighbouring Buddhist countries. His successor, the current abbot Qiushuang, carries on Hanshan's legacy of political merit-making. In 2003, for example, Hanshan temple established a "Charitable Supermarket" to echo the political campaign "to build a harmonious society." The "Charitable Supermarket" (*cishan chaoshi*) provides low-income families with vouchers to purchase household items in specific locations. The following year, the "Hanshan Charity Centre" (*Hanshan Cishan Zhongxin*) was registered with the Suzhou government as a "Non-profit Social Service Organization" to answer the call for religious organizations to be legally and financially accountable as stated in the 2004 "Religious Affairs Regulations." The Charity Centre included state-sanctioned charity programs such as poverty-relief, education funds, disability assistance, etc.

Local government officials occupy important positions in the Charity Centre. They participate in its executive meetings and influence its decision making. Their involvement is not so much as patrons drawing on the social capital of the group, but more as supervisors to keep things in line. This kind of arrangement makes merit with the state through self-regulation as well as responding to state campaigns. In turn, the religious organization gains protection from the state, which is vital given the precarious position of

much religious activity. This kind of political merit making is thus defensive and reactive. It starts with top-down policies and results in religious organizations formulating ways to comply with the state.

Hanshan Temple's subsequent move, the establishment of the Hehe Cultural Foundation (*Hehe Wenhua Jijinhui*) in 2011, was another such initiative to respond to the call of the state for religious philanthropies to be more accountable. It is registered with the Civil Affairs Bureau of Jiangsu Province as a publically funded organization. This marks the transition of Hanshan charities to a more industrialized model. However, those religious groups that perform political merit-making are by no means free from clashes with the state. Sometimes the religious good may not correspond to the state's definition of good. For instance, the foundation's plan to build the largest animal-releasing park in the province met with frustration because the Buddhist good of compassion in the act of animal releasing has little overlap with the state agenda. Sometimes, therefore, more strategizing is needed. Hehe Cultural Foundation has thus now added an old age home to their Buddhist academy, answering the state's call for social groups to help confront the problem of an aging society.

Unlike those large successful religious charities such as Hanshan Temple and Amity Foundation, smaller religious groups can only offer limited services because they cannot make much political merit with the state. For instance, the United Heart Church (*Tongxin Tang*) in Southern Jiangsu has operated an old age home called The Gospel Hall (*Fuyin Tang*) since 1999 and did not receive a license until 2006. Its existence was considered an inconvenience to the local Religious Affairs Bureau and was only acquiesced to because the pastor was cautious not to cause trouble for the local government.

Such defensive political merit making is also clearly exhibited during the state-initiated "Religious Charity Week" campaigns throughout the country. The five official religions (Daoism, Buddhism, Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism) are expected to join hands in donating money for charitable and philanthropic causes in response to the "Advice on Encouraging and Regulating the Religious Sector's Participation in Philanthropic and Charitable Activities" issued by the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) in February 2012. In Jiangsu province, the Religious Affairs Bureau received 16,797,826 RMB (roughly 2.7 million USD) during the Charity Week in 2013. The money was then passed to the Disabilities Foundation, a GONGO ("government-organized non-governmental organization"). Many small churches and temples, especially in the relatively poorer northern part of Jiangsu, where they did not have the same cultural and economic capital to make merit with the state as Hanshan Temple or Amity Foundation do, participated in this campaign because this was their best chance of purchasing an "immunity" ticket from the state.

Political merit-making is defensive in China's authoritarian state because the state always has the upper hand in the hierarchical relationship and religious groups can only gain safety if they perform some kind of merit-making. Therefore, this defensive merit-making necessitates a strong tendency of self-regulation, which pushes religious charities toward the more industrialized forms and the more universalizing concept of the good promoted by the state.

In contrast to the PRC government, which subsumed all areas of welfare during the Maoist period, authoritarian (i.e., pre-1987) Taiwan's attitude toward welfare resembled what we would now call neoliberalism. It spent its revenue mostly on military and economic expenses and assumed very limited responsibilities for welfare. With the onset of

democratization, the government thus had no complaint about religious and other organizations taking over a major part of social welfare and services delivery.

Democratization, however, has altered the balance of power in Taiwanese political merit-making. On the one hand, temples such as Tianhou Gong in Lukang still make merit with the local government through donating fire trucks and garbage trucks. During the Chinese New Year, Tianhou Gong distributes necessities such as rice, oil and food to households on a name list provided by the township government.⁴ It is also common for local government to turn to local religious organizations to provide aid to needy families that are not qualified for state welfare programs. On the other hand, the state in Taiwan constantly relies on those religious philanthropies for governance. Even more importantly, elected officials know that religious organizations can be highly effective in getting out the vote, so they need to cultivate good relations with those groups, and not just use them. In contrast to Chinese government officials who only exercise their power over religious groups, officials in Taiwan reckoned that active participation in local religious charities often helps someone running for office gain political power.

All levels of local government in Taiwan collaborate intimately with temples, NGOs and private individuals. In the case of Lukang's Zijidian Educational Foundation, which was named after the local temple Zijidian, donors range from wealthy individuals and companies to branches of the Lion's Club and Rotary Club, and the Tianhou Gong. While the donors contributed land for a new community centre, the township government paid for the building. In this process of collaboration, religious groups and the state enter into a

⁴ This may be an extension of the earlier practice of some temples to distribute food to the poor during the Seventh Month festival, when large amounts of food are offered to the hungry ghosts, which some temples then gave away as charity.

relationship of mutual benefit that is very different from the defensive political merit-making in mainland China.

Sometimes the collaborative nature of political merit-making in Taiwan even allows temples to avoid the state in order to pursue more spiritual merit. For instance, Longshan Si, the second largest temple in Lukang, does not engage with the state or charitable activities because it has a secure source of income based on landholdings and its leaders do not have much personal political ambition. It can thus avoid the state in a way that is nearly impossible of temples of any size on the mainland.

The post-democratization Taiwanese state tries to enforce certain financial and management models for both religious philanthropies and other NGOs, though only with partial success. Since neither side can achieve its own goals without relying on the other, the relationship remains collaborative. For instance, during the Hungry Ghost Festival in Lukang, the ritual of floating water lanterns (*fang shuideng*) included sponsors such as the Dizang temple (*Dizang Wang Miao*), the township and county governments, the Quanzhou Merchants' Association, the Junior Chamber of Commerce, and Taipower, the state-owned electric company. This elaborate web of collaboration demonstrates once more the mutualism of political merit-making for religious groups in Taiwan.

In both Chinese societies, religious philanthropies perform political merit-making. The state, no matter whether authoritarian or democratic, strong or weak, performs large roles in determining the content, form, and parameters of tolerance for such organizations. In China, religious groups practice political merit-making defensively by actively collaborating with the state on all fronts of their philanthropic activities, in exchange for political protection or limited autonomy in religious matters. However, such organizations

walk a thin line between being an independent religious entity and an extension of the state. Religious philanthropies in post-democratization Taiwan perform a kind of political merit-making that is more based on mutual benefit. As much as temples and churches make political merit to thrive, politicians rely on temples for their success.

Civic Selves

Consider the following two snapshots:

- In Taiwan, upon entering the Tzu Chi Hospital in Hualian, one sees to the left a two-storey mosaic portrait of the Buddha caring for a sick monk. To the right stands an array of registration counters and a waiting area with rows of seats filled with patients, families, and migrant caregivers. Men and women wearing dark yellow Tzu Chi volunteer uniform vests approach every stranger with congenial smiles and attentive greetings. Similarly, in the Presbyterian Mackay Hospital in Hsinchu, one enters the red-brick building under the façade arch topped with the Cross and is immediately greeted by volunteers in pink uniform vests offering help and directions, smiling while wishing everyone "peace (*ping'an*)."
- In the Suzhou branch of Tzu Chi in China in 2004, a large number of men and women volunteers in dark blue uniforms were busy rehearsing a sign language musical performance of "The Sutra about the Deep Kindness of Parents and the Difficulty of Repaying It" (*Fumu Enzhong Nanbaojing*) on the stage. The acting, lighting, and directing are exactly the same as at the premier in Taipei back in 1999 and as the performance in Kuala Lumpur by local devotees in 2005.

The above two snapshots point to a convergence in the transnational currents of religious philanthropy: they show us individuals volunteering for organized (and industrialized) philanthropy. The shared new trend is two-fold, involving active voluntarism and embodiment in the sense of formalized emotion. In other words, a new subjectivity has arisen as part and parcel of the industrialized philanthropy.

The genealogy of this new subjectivity harkens back to a mixture of heritages. These heritages include Confucian *ren* (benevolence or humanness), Mozi's *jian'ai* (impartial love), Daoist *bao* or *baoying* (cosmic retribution) and *ganying* (cosmic resonance), Buddhist *futian* (field of blessedness) and, above all, *gongde* (merit) – a term that has become widely used in secular contexts and politics, as we have just discussed.

The new subjectivity brought three roughly simultaneous changes in China and Taiwan: a new image of volunteers as deployable agents of civic love, an active embrace of cosmopolitanism, and new forms of embodiment. These new philanthropic volunteers do not share the subjectivity of earlier Chinese literati who wrote down memories and reflections on their good works, like those figures in the Ming and Qing dynasties described by Johanna Handlin Smith (Smith, 2009). He or she does not work alone, and is part of a membership or at least a regular donor on the roster of a religious group that has an open membership across gender, hometown, surname, or occupation, and that runs a program of charity. He or she may wear a uniform or carry a name tag when acting as part of the group, not only to participate in rituals, but also – and perhaps mainly – to volunteer in the organization, receive and give training, and deliver social services. He or she is reachable by cell phone, familiar with social media, apt to pack up and move for a mission, and enthusiastic in speaking for and of the group – be it for proselytizing, fund-raising, or

"sharing" her personal transformation with fellow devotees. Such a person is compassionate in delivering services and goods to recipients, and acts and moves with a certain body language of gestures, emotional expressions, and even dietary constraints and hairstyles that are considered attributes of the group's identity. In a subtle and yet noticeable way, these features contribute to the feeling that she or he is a "better" person.

In this newly widespread form of volunteering, doing good concerns the self. These new "good" people have adapted to two waves of globalization: the Christian missionaries since the 19th century and the global modern organizations of Taiwan Buddhism since around the 1980s. The Christian ideal of charity and the transnational expansion of Taiwan's Buddhism highlighted ideals of universalism in doing good, and at the same time re-embedded those good deeds in a global context. This occurred through new organizational networks as well as through competition between groups for their cause-driven and program-differentiating ways of doing religion. Doing good as a way of living religion is experience-seeking, action-centred, and participatory in spirit, and it relies on the crafting of a new subjectivity. For many people this new subjectivity came from a view of bodhisattva personhood that bestows religious individuals with deployable agency, and such an agency is expressed in a "Protestantized" voluntary imperative combined with cosmopolitanism (see Berger, 2007, p. 25). The new fad for volunteer-cosmopolitans has brought a new emphasis on embodiment. To put it bluntly, the rise of the industrialized philanthropy we see in China and Taiwan grows from the collectively organized embodiment of "loving hearts."

The embodiment trend in this new subjectivity under industrialized philanthropy directs our consciousness to look outwards rather than inwards. One becomes a better

person by engaging the collective, by being out and about to bring philanthropy to complete strangers. One speaks of one's love and works on one's mind in an organized and collective context. A good person crafts rational action to contribute to the public good.

What brings the public to the religious self and vice versa?

The meanings and the processes of the re-sacralization of the self through public activity differ in China and Taiwan. Here, we suggest an explanation of the differences with the term "civic selving," to highlight the uneasy combination between the public and a good individual, between secular civil society and religious goodness.⁵ We hope also to capture how a shared set of heritages, reworked through waves of globalization, would eventually be transformed into a new good person who contributes as a member of a broader civic collective.

The new subjectivity across the Taiwan Strait invokes a sense of moral mission for their philanthropic way of living religion. One frequently hears in China and Taiwan about the goal of transforming society and hence the world by transforming individuals from the inside out – purifying human hearts (*jinghua renxin*). For example, "Spread Charity Culture, Purify the Way of the World and Human Hearts" (*Hongyang Cishan Wenhua, Jinghua Shidao Renxin*) is the slogan for the Lingshan Charitable Foundation in China. In other words, charity culture is perceived to be a partial antidote to concerns about a rising moral crisis. For another example, Tzu Chi settings and media in Taiwan ubiquitously offer a vision of social change that starts from the human heart and extends to the surrounding society and ultimately the whole world: Tzu Chi followers collectively utter the vow, "Purify human

⁵ We borrow loosely from the concept of "moral selving," as developed by Allahyari (2000).

hearts, harmonize society, toward a world without catastrophe (*jinghua renxin, xianghe shehui, tianxia wu zainan*)."

This perception of social change that starts from the person and reaches to the world assumes a causal relation from centre to circumference, a concentric zone mode of movement. Indeed, the latest Tzu Chi organizational reform is named the Concentric Zone of Unified Hearts (*Tongxin Yuan*). Such a concentric vision of social dynamics recalls the Confucian ripple effect of social relations and its related cultivational discourse: one begins from cultivation of the individual, to complete the family, to govern the country, and to rule all under heaven (*xiushen qijia zhiguo ping tianxia*). Tzu Chi's Buddhist version of cultivational discourse does not share the political agenda of the Confucian version. It is nonetheless a kind of civic selving that puts individual goodness in the perspective of the larger society and hence the greater world. Civic selving thus empowers the new good person with a vision of a better world.

Morality notwithstanding, the new subjectivity across the Taiwan Strait indicates deployable agency that places one's self in the social context of organized philanthropy. By engaging the common good, one is not only morally correct but also socially and politically competent. It is in this sense that we use civic selving instead of the more psychological analysis of moral selving. It is here – in the mechanism of placing the individual into society, allowing a person to "feel something larger than him/herself," that we see a new embodiment mechanism formed through participation in religious philanthropies. The formation of a new subjectivity through narrating a self who does good, draws on more global discourses such as the cosmopolitan idea of being related to strangers beyond face-to-face local settings, and, at the same time, relies on more local discourses such as

genealogies of civility. Here, we will mention only a few examples of our observations on the differences among the genealogies in Taiwan and China so as to illustrate the proposed concept of civic selving for further research.

Civic selving in China embraces a distinctive discourse of Socialist morality and discipline in collectivity. Espousing the rise of individuality in the post-Mao era, individuals who were socialized into Socialist forms of embodiment have been left alone to search for a new sense of order for the self. A former member of the Chinese military, for example, explained why she came to volunteer for Tzu Chi: "I need to do something to help people! You know, doing good deeds, using up my remaining heat (*fahui yu re*)!⁶... Unlike other places, [Tzu Chi] is very institutionalized (*zhiduhua*) and organized. There are very clear rules. ... Each uniform speaks of the person's role.... You know this is a trustworthy organization... very professional."

Civic selving in Taiwan harkens back to the KMT's civility campaigns since the New Life Movement (which began on the mainland in the 1930s) and its subsequent revisions in Taiwan such as "public virtue heart" (*gong de xin*) and just "lining up," as ways of creating discipline in collectivity (Lee, 2007; Weller, 1999). Somewhat like the assumption of "teachable bodies" in the state-engineered civility campaigns, one of the distinctive discourses of civic selving in Taiwan is a sense of education through doing good. This is reminiscent of the old Chinese cultivational discourse for doing good, and yet with a much clearer sense of the self in society. Much like what cultural psychologist Heidi Fung (1999) calls "opportunity education" (*jihui jiaoyu*) in the socialization of children in Taiwan, one

⁶ This is a very Socialist expression as well, meaning to make better use of old age.

commonly hears about the obligation to be taught through doing good (Fung, 1999). Most representative is Tzu Chi's founding motto: "relief for the poor and instruction for the rich" (*ji pin jiao fu*), namely, the rich should learn about themselves and about life and Buddhism through encountering poverty.

Social Constructions of Goodness

One of the changes we can see occurring with the construction of a new kind of civic self through industrialized philanthropy is a change in the very definition of "goodness." We held a focus group in Shanghai in June 2014, which included representatives of the Buddhist, Daoist, Protestant, and Muslim official hierarchies, as well as some clergy deeply involved in philanthropy. One of our primary goals was to try to understand how these very different religious traditions thought about their goals – about the nature of goodness. The initial results were disappointing. Everyone seemed to undertake identical kinds of projects, like old age homes, poverty relief, emergency aid, and moral educational programs. Even worse, they claimed that the specifics of religious belief were irrelevant. One after another echoed the common Chinese sentiment that "all religions are the same; they urge people to do good." And good, apparently, was an absolute rather than something tied to specific theologies or religious practices.

When we pressed the question, however, more significant differences began to appear. For instance, when we asked whether releasing captive birds or fish counted as "doing good," one of the Buddhist monks immediately said, "Absolutely, and it's a really important kind of good too." The Christians and Muslims completely disagreed, though. And so as well for other things: rituals to appease the dead after a disaster for the Buddhists, but not the Christians; getting people to stop burning incense for the Christians,

but not for the Buddhists and Daoists; and so on. As one monk said after these differences started to become clear at the focus group, “If you want to do charity on a large scale in China, you have to take out the religious content.” That is, a single language of philanthropic goodness dominated discourse – for secular NGOs as much as for religious groups – but genuine differences still existed under the surface.

These differences become clearest at smaller scales, where religions have much less pressure to emulate secular philanthropic groups. They illustrate that a multiplicity of possible forms of “goodness” still exists, and that the monopoly of a single discourse is not complete. One example of the kind of thing that usually escapes the notice of studies of philanthropy or faith-based services is the creation of group identity and the coordination among groups that frequently happens through ritual. This function of ritual has been a commonplace observation in anthropology since Durkheim (1995), and is easily seen in Chinese societies as well. That is why local temples are frequently symbols of their communities, just as their rituals are the most important events that bring people physically together and cause them to cooperate with each other, and often with Daoists as well. Buddhist temples and Christian churches are sometimes not so geographically based, but they too can create a very strong sense of community by bringing followers together for periodic rituals. Some rituals help groups cross boundaries as well, as when the famous Tianhou Temple in Lukang hosts deities and their followers from visiting temples almost every day. In the standard form, possessed mediums bloody themselves with swords and nail maces to show the power of their trance and their deity, after which the sedan chair holding the deity approaches the temple’s front entrance three times before finally entering. This is a greeting ritual, a kind of elaborate diplomacy that encourages relations between

communities. While we will not discuss it here, it is worth noting that the recent trend of denoting temples or rituals as “cultural heritage” actually continues some of these services under a new guise, in both Taiwan and mainland China. Religions have generally been far better at fostering a sense of community than secular NGOs, but the secularist trends of the twentieth century have meant that such rituals are never taken seriously as a kind of philanthropy.

A second realm in which religions actually differ in practice is in the delivery of what might be called spiritual goods. Thus, for example, some temples and churches across the traditions reject very active involvement in standard philanthropy because they see it as a distraction from their real purposes and thus also as a misuse of limited resources of time and money. One Christian group in Nanjing, for instance, does almost none of the typical philanthropic activities, in spite of the loss of potential political merit. They say this is because such activities all involve things of this world, while their only concern is with eternity; the only good that ultimately matters is saving souls. Some Buddhist groups also limit their philanthropic work to whatever they see as the minimum to stay in the good graces of the state, but devote most of their resources instead to specifically Buddhist educational goals like seminaries, or to opportunities for people to better live the dharma, for instance with sutra recitation rituals or animal releasing rituals. Such activities would never fall under the purview of secular philanthropic NGOs, but at least within the understanding of each religious tradition, they offer services that are just as important.

Finally, we can see yet another form of goodness in what is probably the most common religious activity in Chinese societies: votive prayer, or what might better simply

be called wishing.⁷ When asked why they are burning incense in temples, most people will answer that they are there to “hope for peace and quiet” (*qiu ping’an*). What they mean by peace and quiet is a life of relative good health, a comfortable economic life, and a freedom from disaster for themselves and their families. Sometimes these wishes take more concrete and immediate forms, like the desire to do well in the college entrance examination, or to have a child’s illness cured, or to run a successful business.

Such interactions with divinities are as common in officially sanctioned Buddhist and Daoist temples as they are in village shrines or at spirit medium altars. They are common as well in many churches where congregations frequently pray for the well-being of their brothers and sisters. In some churches, there is also more active votive activity, like laying on hands to cure illness. Healing is, in fact, one of the most common explanations for Christian conversion, especially among more rural congregations in China (Lian, 2010; Zhou, 2012).

All of these forms of the good offer something similar to what standard charity does: the promise of health, economic aid, stronger family and community ties, and disaster relief. Yet for most of the literature on philanthropy as well as most of the recognized religious actors in China, the Red Cross counts as philanthropy but healing by laying on hands does not, burying bodies after a disaster counts but holding rituals for their ghosts does not, holding a workshop on empowerment counts but building community by reciting sutras together does not. This is not because earlier forms of the good have died out, but because just one form has come to control the world of public discourse about philanthropy since

⁷ We follow the unpublished work of Yang Shen in glossing such activities as wishes rather than prayers.

the 1980s: individualizing rather than based in groups like guilds or lineages, auditable and rationalized rather than based on ad hoc decisions, universal rather than rooted in care for particular communities. In a word, industrialized philanthropy dominates explicit discourse, even if it has not erased group-based or religion-specific forms of charity in practice.

Conclusion

Industrialized religious philanthropy in contemporary Chinese societies is the product of the two large processes we have been discussing: the increasing importance of political merit-making and the rise of a cosmopolitan, civic self. Both are laid over the many layers of earlier religious social activity and images of the good. In spite of all the political and economic differences between Taiwan and the Chinese mainland, both these changes happened especially beginning in the 1980s, and they continue into the present.

Political merit-making took on a new role in both places because they created more room for a society (including religion) that could operate independently from the state during that decade, though in very different ways. Taiwan's democratization and the decay of the old authoritarian structures of control opened a path for the growth of large philanthropic religious groups like Tzu Chi, while at the same time pressing local politicians and religious groups (especially temples) into mutualist relations of political merit-making. The politicians needed the votes that temples and churches could influence through their social networks, and religious groups needed the help and support of politicians. China during that period moved away from the totalitarian goals of the Cultural Revolution and began to champion the role that a partially independent society could play by contributing to state projects. The result was a more defensive form of political merit-making, where

religious groups often performed charity in response to state desires. Both places may also have felt the pull of the globalizing neoliberal slogans of the Reagan and Thatcher periods, which nominally encouraged increased roles for social and religious groups to provide welfare as the state stepped back. As this happened, both states also took the inevitable steps of insisting on a heavy supervisory role, thus promoting the rise of industrial techniques like auditing and the replication of common philanthropic goals across very different religious and secular groups.

At much the same time, both places experienced a rapid increase in wealth, mobility and information flows – both national and international. These combined with the beginnings of a decline in the small rural communities that had previously controlled much of social and religious life. The result was a period of innovation in religious forms, like the new imaginations of the self, especially the idea of a cosmopolitan, civic self. These new civic selves act out of individual choice to make the world a better place by reshaping their own hearts and those of others. Such people typically use the language of love, which is now ubiquitous in China and Taiwan, to capture this feeling, whether as God's love (*agape* or *caritas*) or the Buddhist idea of the caring heart (*puti xin*).

Such new-style volunteers are hardly the only way of organizing religious charity, and neither are the disembodied, rationalized, countable structures of industrialized philanthropy. Nevertheless, both these Chinese societies have developed in similar directions, responding in part to their shared cultural resources and histories, and in part to the specific political changes and global developments of the 1980s and beyond. In spite of that, it is important to recall that those earlier ways of imagining and acting on goodness still survive, providing a stock of alternative possibilities for the future, and offering kinds

of goodness to people that remain invisible to the standardized eyes of industrial philanthropy.

Character List

bao 报
baoying 报应
cishan chaoshi 慈善超市
daoyuan 道院
Dizang Wang Miao 地藏王庙
duo yige Ciji ren, jiu duo yige haoren, shao yige huai ren 多一个慈济人，就多一个好人，少一个坏人
fahui yu re 发挥余热
fang shuideng 放水灯
Fumu Enzhong Nanbao Jing 父母恩重难报经
futian 福田
Fuyin Tang 福音堂
ganying 感应
gongde 功德
gong de xin 公德心
Hanshan Cishan Zhongxin 寒山慈善中心
Hehe Wenhua Jijinhui 和合文化基金会
Hongyang Cishan Wenhua, Jinghua Shidao Renxin 弘扬慈善文化，净化世道人心
jian'ai 兼爱
jihui jiaoyu 机会教育
jinghua renxin 净化人心
jinghua renxin, xianghe shehui, tianxia wu zainan 净化人心 和谐社会 天下无灾难
ji pin jiao fu 济贫教富
Lingshan 灵山
Longshan Si 龙山寺
Lukang 鹿港
ping'an 平安
puti xin 菩提心
qiu ping'an 求平安
Quanjiao 泉郊
ren 仁
shantang 善堂
shenming hui 神明会
Tianhou Gong 天后宫
Tongxin Tang 同心堂
Tongxin Yuan 同心圆
Tzu Chi 慈济

xiushen qijia zhiguo ping tianxia 修身 齐家 治国 平天下
zhiduhua 制度化
Zijidian 紫极殿

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