

Tzu Chi's Environmental Bodhisattvas

Confronting Environmental Crisis through Humanistic Buddhist Action

Kathryn Therese Greene



Master's Thesis in Chinese Society and Politics

KIN4593 (30 credits)

Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages (IKOS)

UNIVERSITY OF OSLO

Spring 2020

Tzu Chi's Environmental Bodhisattvas

Confronting Environmental Crisis through Humanistic Buddhist Action

© Kathryn Therese Greene

2020

Tzu Chi's Environmental Bodhisattvas: Confronting Environmental Crisis through Humanistic
Buddhist Action

Kathryn Therese Greene

<https://www.duo.uio.no/>

Abstract

The world is currently facing an unprecedented environmental crisis. The natural, social, and economic costs of ecological degradation have reached such a point that the question of how to ensure development continues along a more sustainable path has become one of the most pressing issues of our time. Recently, a growing number of scholars and environmental activists have suggested a possible affinity between Asian religious traditions and environmentalism, arguing that these traditions can serve as the foundation for a more sustainable future. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to reply conclusively to this claim, I use it as a point of departure for an exploration of how one Asian religious movement—the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation—has attempted to engage with the environmental challenges of the modern era. I pay particular attention to how Tzu Chi’s identity as a humanistic Buddhist movement influences its approach to environmental work; Tzu Chi, I argue, draws upon both the Buddhist tradition as well as more recent trends in Chinese religious philanthropy to produce a robust eco-theology that positions environmentalism as a legitimate space for humanistic Buddhist action. Tzu Chi’s humanistic character, furthermore, influences how its volunteers understand and derive meaning from their work. By adopting the aspirational identity of real-world, environmental bodhisattvas, Tzu Chi volunteers engage with the humanistic tradition to find meaning in everyday acts of environmental service.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Koen Wellens, for the support and guidance he has offered throughout this process. His insight and advice have been invaluable. I would also like to thank the rest of the faculty in Chinese studies that I have had the pleasure of studying under these past two years—it has truly been a privilege.

Great thanks is owed to the faculty and staff at Zhejiang University who helped make my time in Hangzhou both enjoyable and enriching. I would especially like to thank Professor Liu for all the help he offered along the way.

To the family, friends, and classmates who have offered their support and encouragement, I am grateful to you all!

Finally, I am indebted to the many Tzu Chi members who shared their stories with me. Without you, this project would not have been possible. 感恩!

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER ONE: Research Approach and Methodology.....	7
CHAPTER TWO: A Buddhism for the Human Realm.....	16
CHAPTER THREE: How to Purify a Polluted World.....	25
CHAPTER FOUR: To be an Environmental Bodhisattva.....	36
CONCLUSION.....	45
BIBLIOGRAPHY	48

Introduction

The Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation (*fojiao ciji cishan shiye jijinhui* 佛教慈濟慈善事業基金會) is a Buddhist lay organization devoted to social service and charity work. It was established in 1966 by a Taiwanese nun, the Venerable Cheng Yen (*zheng yan* 證嚴), in Hualien, a small city in Taiwan's then undeveloped and impoverished east coast.¹ Cheng Yen was moved to start the organization after two events: first, she heard of an indigenous woman suffering from labor complications who was turned away by a hospital for being unable to afford the treatment fees; and second, she met with three Catholic nuns who posed the following question to her: if Buddhism teaches love and compassion for all living beings, then why do Buddhists not build orphanages and hospitals like Catholics do?² Although initially consisting of only a small number of housewives, Tzu Chi today is the largest lay voluntary organization in Taiwan and an influential player in international humanitarian work. Its global reach is indeed impressive: Tzu-Chi has 517 branch offices spread out across 51 countries.³ Moreover, Tzu-Chi and its approximately ten million members undertake a wide variety of work, involving themselves in everything from medical care to disaster relief.⁴ A humanistic Buddhist movement, Tzu Chi organizes its work around the belief that service should be the core of Buddhist practice.

Tzu Chi launched its first relief mission in the PRC in 1991, in response to a series of devastating floods in Anhui Province. Negotiations headed by Yan Mingfu (then Vice-Minister for Civil Affairs) and Wang Duanzheng (Tzu Chi's Vice-Director) resulted in the organization providing relief to six counties suffering from flooding—a win for a country still facing international

¹ Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation, "Biography of Dharma Master Cheng Yen," May 22, 2014, http://tw.tzuchi.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=159&Itemid=198&lang=en. Tzu Chi regularly writes and publishes in English; because of this, I have chosen to use the romanization Tzu Chi itself uses, i.e., "Tzu Chi" for 慈濟 and "Cheng Yen" for 證嚴.

² Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation, "Biography."

³ Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation, "Tzu Chi Global Branch Offices," May 21, 2012, http://tw.tzuchi.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=974%3Atzu-chi-global-offices&Itemid=284&lang=en.

⁴ Foreign Languages Department, Tzu Chi Culture and Communication Foundation, "Tzu Chi Q&A: A Glimpse into the Missions and Spirit of Tzu Chi," August 2017, [http://www.tzuchi.org/id/inliners/201711/Tzu%20Chi%20Q&A_First%20Edition%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.tzuchi.org/id/inliners/201711/Tzu%20Chi%20Q&A_First%20Edition%20(1).pdf). Note that "membership" generally refers to anyone who makes donations; the number of *volunteers* (which could not be determined with certainty) is different.

indignation (and thus reduced foreign aid) after Tiananmen.⁵ Following the project's success, Tzu-Chi's work in the PRC expanded steadily (both in terms of size and scope) over the next two decades. This success in negotiating access to the mainland is notable for several reasons. First, despite the ostensibly secular nature of its work, Tzu Chi is a genuine religious movement led by an ordained Buddhist nun. Although PRC religious policy has certainly retreated from the extremes of the Cultural Revolution era, the Chinese leadership nonetheless remains committed to limiting the influence and public profile of religion. While the state has recently signaled a desire to utilize the resources of religious groups to lessen its social welfare burden—most pertinently, the 2012 “Opinions on Encouraging and Standardizing the Public Philanthropic Activities of Religious Groups” called upon religious organizations to “promote the development of public philanthropy within the religious sector”⁶—religious groups' ability to participate in charity and social service was limited at the time Tzu Chi began making inroads into the mainland. Faith-based organizations like Tzu Chi were small in number, as religion was largely confined to designated “religious” sites for the sake of performing authorized “religious” activities.⁷ Furthermore, Tzu Chi is a Taiwanese organization. As André Laliberté has carefully documented, cross-Strait relations were punctured by a series of diplomatic crises during the '90s and early 2000s; Tzu Chi, however, managed to grow despite this.⁸ A particular watershed moment was the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, as Tzu Chi's significant contribution paved the way for the institutionalization of its activities in the mainland.⁹ In 2008 Tzu Chi registered as the PRC's “first charitable organization with a foreign person as its legal representative,”¹⁰ and in August 2010 it officially opened as the first local office of an overseas NGO in China.¹¹

⁵ André Laliberté, “The Growth of a Taiwanese Buddhist Association in China: Soft Power and Institutional Learning,” *China Information* 27, no. 1 (2012): 87, <https://doi.org/DOI: 10.1177/0920203X12466206>.

⁶ The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China 中华人民共和国中央人民政府, “Guanyu guli he guifan zongjiao jie congshi gongyi cishan huodong de yijian” 关于鼓励和规范宗教界从事公益慈善活动的意见 [Opinions on Encouraging and Standardizing the Public Philanthropic Activities of Religious Groups], February 27, 2012, http://www.gov.cn/zwgk/2012-02/27/content_2077338.htm.

⁷ Susan K. McCarthy, “Serving Society, Repurposing the State: Religious Charity and Resistance in China,” *The China Journal* 70 (2013): 49, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/671330>.

⁸ Laliberté, “The Growth,” 87-90.

⁹ Laliberté, “The Growth,” 90.

¹⁰ Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation 慈济慈善事业基金会, “Ciji cishan shiye jijinhui zhan lve fazhan zongti baogao” 慈济慈善事业基金会战略发展总体报告 [Tzu Chi Foundation's Comprehensive Report on Strategic Development], accessed December 5, 2019, <http://www.tzuchi.org.cn/doc/10-1.pdf>.

¹¹ Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation, “Tzu Chi Opens Chinas 1st Overseas NGO Office,” August 23, 2010, http://tw.tzuchi.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=647%3Atzu-chi-opens-chinas-dirst-overseas-ngo-office&lang=en.

As of 2018, Tzu Chi had a total of 37 permanent locations in China spread across nine of its provinces and all four of its municipalities.¹² Geographically, however, its aid work extends well beyond that: Tzu Chi has active projects in place throughout the entire country.¹³ Moreover, its work has diversified: in addition to continued disaster relief, Tzu Chi has also provided scholarships and financial aid to students, facilitated bone marrow donations, and built schools, hospitals, and nursing homes.¹⁴ The organization estimates that since 1991, over three million people have received some form of material assistance from its annual “winter aid” program alone.¹⁵ Moreover, Tzu Chi has undergone a process of localization in mainland China and now claims to have 6,000 certified volunteers there.¹⁶ Tzu Chi largely owes its global reach to the Taiwanese diaspora; new local chapters are usually set up following the initiative of members who immigrate beyond Taiwan.¹⁷ At the same time Tzu Chi missions were expanding in China, Taiwanese immigrant entrepreneurs who had settled in the mainland began holding meetings in their capacities as Tzu Chi members.¹⁸ While the organization’s sensitive status inhibited the group from going too public with its activities at first, official registration brought greater openness and the opening up of activities to non-Taiwanese.¹⁹ Today an increasing number of local Chinese are involved in its work.

One significant part of Tzu Chi’s work in the PRC is environmental. This is itself a major focus of the organization globally. Although a more recent development, Tzu Chi now considers environmental protection to be one of its “Eight Footprints” (*ba da fa yin* 八大法印), or key areas of work. The story behind its origin goes something like this: One day in August 1990, Cheng Yen was invited to give a speech in Taichung (central Taiwan). On her way to the venue,

¹² Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation 慈济慈善事业基金会, “Lianluo fangshi” 联络方式 [Contact Us], December 3, 2018, <http://www.tzuchi.org.cn/联系我们/各地联系方式>.

¹³ Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation 佛教慈济慈善事业基金会, “Ciji nianjian” 慈济年鉴 [Tzu-Chi Almanac 2018], 450-451, accessed December 6, 2019, <http://tw.tzuchi.org/ebook/almanac/2018almanac/>.

¹⁴ Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation, Almanac, 450-451.

¹⁵ Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation, Almanac, 451.

¹⁶ Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation, Almanac, 503.

¹⁷ Weishan Huang, “The Place of Socially Engaged Buddhism in China: Emerging Religious Identity in the Local Community of Urban Shanghai,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 25 (2018): 540, <http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/>.

¹⁸ Huang, “The Place,” 532.

¹⁹ Huang, “The Place,” 548.

she walked along a street littered with trash and grew increasingly distressed. During her speech later that day, Cheng Yen remembered the litter-strewn street and urged the audience to use the two hands they were applauding her with to go out and recycle (*yi guzhang de shuangshou zuo huanbao* 以鼓掌的双手做环保). One volunteer took her words to heart and began collecting recyclables, inspiring others in the process and laying the foundation for a movement.²⁰ Tzu Chi, which measures the products it has recycled by weight, claims to have recycled over 80 million kilograms of material in 2018 alone.²¹ In addition to recycling, Tzu Chi is also committed to environmental education, which it does by promoting an environmentally friendly lifestyle that advocates thrift and rejects rampant consumerism. This work is carried out globally by 107, 652 environmental volunteers (*huanbao zhigong* 环保志工)—a corps of volunteers primarily dedicated to environmental work.²² Both aspects of this environmental mission are at play in China today. Tzu Chi’s official goal for environmental work in the PRC is to “promote the importance of environmentalism; lead the public to environmentalism through one’s own example; reduce carbon emissions; work for a low-carbon society; and live together symbiotically with the earth.”²³

Yet although Tzu Chi has attracted a significant amount of scholarly attention, its environmental work remains rather understudied in the academic literature.²⁴ Lu Weixu has evaluated Tzu Chi’s recycling program in Taiwan to argue that its success holds valuable lessons for environmentalism in the mainland.²⁵ Chen Li and Zhou Chunyi have argued similarly, finding

²⁰ Foreign Languages Department, Tzu Chi Culture and Communication Foundation, “Tzu Chi Q&A,” 110.

²¹ Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation, Almanac, 499.

²² Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation, Almanac, 496.

²³ Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation 慈济慈善事业基金会, “Huanbao tuiguang xiangmu baogao shu” 环保推广项目报告书 [Report on the Environmental Protection Promotion Program], accessed January 11, 2019, <http://www.tzuchi.org.cn/doc/8-3.pdf>. Report is for the year 2014-2015. [宣传环保的重要, 身体力行带动群众做环保, 减少碳排放, 推动低碳社会, 与地球共生息]

²⁴ For one of the most comprehensive studies about Tzu Chi, see: C. Julia Huang, *Charisma and Compassion: Cheng Yen and the Buddhist Tzu Chi Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

²⁵ Lu Weixu 卢威翔, “Zongjiao gongyi cishan shiye de jianli yu yunxing: Taiwan diqu Ciji laji fenlei huishou zhiye de chengong jingyan yu qishi” 宗教公益慈善事业的建立与运行: 台湾地区慈济垃圾分类回收志业的成功经验与启示 [The Creation and Operation of a Religious Philanthropic Enterprise: The Success of Tzu Chi’s Waste Sorting and Recycling Program in Taiwan and Its Meaning for the Mainland], *Huadong ligong daxue xuebao* 华东理工大学学报 2 (2017): 1–9.

Tzu Chi's ability to empower individual action particularly valuable.²⁶ Chengpang Lee and Ling Han analyzed Tzu Chi periodicals to trace the development of its environmental discourse over time; they concluded that environmentalism is not only a significant concern of the organization, but one that has shifted from concern with the local environment to the global.²⁷ Yet although the existing literature does touch upon what I will term Tzu Chi's "eco-theology," I seek to expand upon this work by situating Tzu Chi's environmentalism more squarely within the humanistic Buddhist context that gave rise to it. Moreover, I try to move this discussion beyond the level of theory and explore how individual volunteers engage with these teachings in practice. A modern humanistic Buddhist movement, what does Tzu Chi teach about the individual's role in contributing to, and offsetting, the global environmental crisis? Furthermore, how do the volunteers of this largely lay movement understand and identify with these teachings? Specifically, how are acts of environmental service and an eco-friendly lifestyle transformed into meaningful forms of Buddhist practice?

In this thesis, I will first analyze Tzu Chi's eco-theology with a view toward better understanding how it frames environmentalism in relation to its more general commitment to service. I rely on terminology borrowed from Wan-Li Ho, who defines eco-theology as the attempt to locate relationships between nature and humankind from a religious perspective.²⁸ Moreover, I seek to analyze Tzu Chi's eco-theology in such a way that sets up a discussion of how these teachings are understood and drawn upon by volunteers as they navigate their day-to-day lives. Here I take inspiration from scholars of lived religion who argue for a greater emphasis on "how religion and spirituality are practiced, experienced, and expressed by ordinary people (rather than official spokespersons) in the context of their everyday lives,"²⁹ as well as from anthropologists who urge going beyond doctrine and canon so as to better understand religious experience and interpretation. From this perspective, Graham Harvey writes, "Religion...is not properly

²⁶ Chen Li 陈丽 and Zhou Chunyi 周纯义, "Taiwan fojiao cishan ciji jijinhui de huanbao shijian ji qishi" 台湾佛教慈善慈济基金会的环保实践及启示 [The Practice of and Lessons from the Environmental work of Taiwan's Tzu Chi Foundation], *Shehui shichuang* 社会视窗 6, no. 351 (2010): 219-20.

²⁷ Chengpang Lee and Ling Han, "Recycling Bodhisattva: The Tzu-Chi Movement's Response to Global Climate Change," *Social Compass* 62, no. 3 (2015): 311-25, <https://doi.org/DOI: 10.1177/0037768615587809>.

²⁸ Wan-Li Ho, *Ecofamilism: Women, Religion, and Environmental Protection in Taiwan* (St. Petersburg, FL: Three Pines Press, 2016), 32.

²⁹ Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 12.

understood without attention to its fully embodied, materialized, local and varying practice: its vernacular of lived reality.”³⁰ This approach asks us to examine not only what people “do” in the context of their daily lives, but also how they understand and value their own experiences.³¹

The first chapter of this thesis details the methodology used and includes a discussion of ethical considerations and the limitations of my data. In recognition of its influence upon Tzu Chi, the second chapter will discuss the development of humanistic Buddhism in China and Taiwan. I pay particular attention to how humanistic movements have reinterpreted traditional Mahāyāna teachings on pure lands and on the figure of the bodhisattva to rationalize a culture of charity and service. The third chapter examines material from Tzu Chi’s environmental literature. Tzu Chi’s eco-theology, I argue, engages with both the Buddhist tradition and more recent developments in Chinese philanthropy to broaden the humanistic call to action to include environmental activism. The fourth chapter analyzes interviews with volunteers to better understand how environmentalism is understood and made meaningful for Tzu Chi volunteers. Ultimately, I argue that volunteers find meaning in environmentalism by adopting the activist identity of the real-world, “environmental” bodhisattva.

³⁰ Graham Harvey, “Field Research: Participant Observation,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler (London: Routledge, 2011), 217-218.

³¹ Harvey, “Field Research,” 218.

Chapter One: Research Approach and Methodology

Research Site and Gaining Access

When I learned that I would be spending a semester in Hangzhou as a student at Zhejiang University, I became interested in doing a fieldwork-based study of Tzu Chi. Having read that it was well-established in eastern China, I began looking into Tzu Chi's presence in Hangzhou, the provincial capital of Zhejiang Province and my home for the next five months. Fortunately, this was easier than I expected.

Like most social organizations in China today, Tzu Chi has made good use of the country's most popular app: WeChat. Not only does Tzu Chi have a central public account (公众号 *gongzhong hao*), but most local branches have their own accounts, too. While these accounts are partly for the benefit of current volunteers, they serve another purpose as well: by publishing content both about Tzu Chi's core beliefs as well as the practical information such as meeting points and volunteering schedules, they help facilitate the participation of new or prospective members. Importantly, local branches generally organize themselves around administrative districts. For instance, a Tzu Chi volunteer who lives in district *a* of a city will usually attend Tzu Chi's weekly book club (*dushu hui* 读书会) and carry out their weekly recycling duty both in district *a* alongside other district *a* volunteers. These WeChat groups are useful, then, in communicating to prospective volunteers where their nearest Tzu Chi hub is, what its volunteers do, and even when they do it. In reaching out to Tzu Chi, I followed the same route as a prospective volunteer might: I first found Tzu Chi Hangzhou's public WeChat account, and then contacted the volunteer listed as responsible for my locality. This "key informant" then facilitated my further access to the group. Through her, I managed to secure a tour of the local environmental education base, a standing invitation to my district's weekly book club and a series of public lectures at the Tzu Chi bookstore, and the contact information of other volunteers. I benefitted tremendously here from Tzu Chi's status as a social organization—and religious movement—that is actively invested in engaging with the public and growing its membership. Most Tzu Chi events and spaces are open to anyone who stops by, and that includes the foreign student. I was excited to learn that Tzu Chi Hangzhou is a small but active group, involved in three main areas

of work: poverty relief (volunteers solicit funds and organize the donation of material goods for struggling families); eldercare (volunteers make monthly visits to a local nursing home); and environmental work (volunteers organize weekly recycling events and other activities at Hangzhou's two environmental education bases).

That said, I still worried about whether or not I would be able to get people to really *talk* with me. Initially my prospects seemed good. Most volunteers have deeply positive feelings towards Tzu Chi and are excited to share these with others. Although the PRC constitution emphasizes that no organization or individual may force citizens to believe or not to believe in any religion³²—a clear warning against proselytizing—Chinese people of all faiths can and regularly do find ways to share their beliefs with others. Secure in the value of their work and invested in spreading their message, Tzu Chi volunteers are no different. Most report talking about Tzu Chi with family, friends, and coworkers, and are accustomed enough to answering questions about the group that their answers can seem nearly rehearsed. By this I do not mean to imply a lack of sincerity in their answers, but merely to remark on the ease and readiness with which they opened up about their experiences. This is also shaped by Tzu Chi's emphasis on what might be termed “sharing one's testimony” in evangelical Christian culture. Whether at more formal events or weekly book club, Tzu Chi volunteers are regularly encouraged to reflect on who they were before they joined and who they became afterwards, and to share this story (for it usually is presented as a clear and well-thought-out narrative) with other volunteers.

Yet after having several casual chats with volunteers, I found myself unexpectedly struggling to secure arrangements for more formal interviews, which I thought my research would benefit from. Although volunteers had consistently signaled that they were ready and willing to sit about and stew over their experiences in the Tzu Chi café, they would then turn down my interview requests with a polite, “I don't really know what I'm talking about.” Eventually it became clear that my potential informants were assuming that they would be expected to provide some kind of authoritative exegesis on Cheng Yen's works and were worried they were not up to the task. I

³²The National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China 中华人民共和国中央人民政府, “Zhonghua renmin gongheguo xianfa” 中华人民共和国宪法 [Constitution of the People's Republic of China], December 4, 1982 (amended March 14, 2004), Chapter II, Section 36, http://www.gov.cn/guoqing/2018-03/22/content_5276318.htm.

realized that I hadn't been particularly clear when soliciting interviews; I had simply told volunteers I was interested in Tzu Chi's environmental work and if I could "conduct an interview" (进行一个访谈) with them. Now I made sure to ask volunteers if they were willing to "share their personal experiences" (分享个人的经验) as environmental volunteers. By taking this approach, I was able to successfully secure several interviews.

Research Approach and Ethical Considerations

As David Silverman reminds us, our choice in methodology should reflect what we as researchers are trying to find out.³³ I decided to take a qualitative approach to my research. While some have defined qualitative research in an essentially functional way—according to Nkwi, Nygamongo, and Ryan it is “any research that uses data that do not indicate ordinal values”³⁴—I prefer Sharan B. Merriam's definition. In a way that resonates with Silverman's approach by highlighting the importance of purpose, Merriam writes that qualitative research seeks to understand “how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world.”³⁵ As I was interested in understanding not only Tzu Chi's eco-theology, but also how volunteers understood these teachings in the context of their daily lives, I deemed a qualitative approach most suitable. Furthermore, I took an ethnographic approach to my research, by which I mean both that I relied on ethnographic methods (particularly participant observation and interviews) and that I directed my research towards ethnography's end goal: to understand the values, beliefs, and behaviors of a “culture-sharing group”³⁶ so as to produce a portrait of said group “that incorporates the views of the participants (*emic*) as well as the views of the researcher (*etic*).”³⁷ In this case, I sought to understand the beliefs and behaviors of Tzu Chi's environmental volunteers. Of course, an ideal ethnography involves sustained periods of research

³³ David Silverman, *Doing Qualitative Research*, 4th ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2013), 11.

³⁴ P. Nkwi, I. Nyamongo, and G. Ryan, *Field Research into Socio-cultural Issues: Methodological Guidelines* (Yaounde, Cameroon: International Center for Applied Social Sciences, Research, and Training/UNFPA, 2001), quoted in Greg Guest, Emily E. Namey, and Marilyn L Mitchell, *Collecting Qualitative Data: A Field Manual for Applied Research* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2013), 3, <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781506374680>.

³⁵ S. Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), quoted in Guest, Namey, and Mitchell, *Collecting Qualitative Data*, 2.

³⁶ M. Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory: A History of Theories of Culture* (New York: T.Y. Crowell, 1968), quoted in John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2007), 68-69.

³⁷ Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 72.

much longer than the several months I had. Nonetheless, I found this to be a useful way to at least frame my research.

Like all qualitative research, ethnography also poses some ethical challenges for the researcher. All researchers should follow basic procedural ethics to minimize potential risks to informants: do no harm; avoid deception; secure informed consent; and ensure privacy and confidentiality.³⁸ This is particularly important when researching China, for as Marina Svensson reminds us, “In China many, or maybe all, research topics dealing with social and political issues can be regarded as sensitive, depending on the timing and framing of the research.”³⁹ Although Tzu Chi has cultivated a generally positive relationship with state authorities, it is nonetheless a religious movement in a country whose relationship with religion is at best uneasy and at worst hostile. Therefore, I made a committed attempt to minimize ethical issues when conducting my research. Within Tzu Chi, volunteers refer to each other by “Sister” (*shijie* 师姐) or “Brother” (*shixiong* 师兄), plus surname. In this thesis I have followed this convention, but in the interest of ensuring confidentiality, the surnames used are pseudonyms. I made sure to inform my interviewees about my academic background and the purpose of my study, as well as their rights as informants, such as the right to withdraw one’s consent and terminate an interview at any time.⁴⁰ I also attempted to disclose my purposes when conducting participant observation. For as Sarah J. Tracy mentions, participant observation and other hallmarks of ethnographic research can pose specific ethical challenges, too: a researcher may solicit information from participants “on the scene” without them even knowing that a researcher is in their midst.⁴¹ Of course, my foreignness was physically obvious, but I nonetheless always introduced myself and my purposes when speaking with participants at Tzu Chi events. At book club sessions, too, my key informant would always allow me a few minutes to explain my project to the group. A related ethical issue was my inclusion in my local Tzu Chi hub’s private WeChat group, an invitation which allowed me to observe volunteers’ daily online interactions. Just as is the case with in-person encounters, online communities can be both public and private, and different rules govern the researcher’s access to

³⁸ Sarah J. Tracy, *Qualitative Research Methods: Collecting Evidence, Crafting Analysis, Communicating Impact* (Chicester: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2013), 243.

³⁹ Marina Svensson, “Ethical Dilemmas: Balancing Distance with Involvement,” in *Doing Fieldwork in China*, ed. Maria Heimer and Stig Thøgersen (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2006), 263.

⁴⁰ Tracy, *Qualitative Research Methods*, 243.

⁴¹ Tracy, *Qualitative Research Methods*, 180.

each. Tracy again highlights the need to secure informed consent when observing private online communities: “Just as researchers need permission to observe a group’s private meetings, they should seek permission before researching and recording groups’ private online activity.”⁴²

WeChat has a feature that allows all group members to see when a new person is added to a group, and my key informant additionally introduced me after inviting me into Tzu Chi’s. Additionally, because Tzu Chi members were generally quite excited about my research, they would often share pictures of me attending their events. Because of this, I trusted that all group members were well enough aware of my presence for me to justifiably remain a part.

Methodology

Although I was primarily interested in the experiences of Tzu Chi volunteers, I thought it was first important to understand the belief system that they engage with, or in other words, to understand how volunteers rationalize their beliefs. I relied on document analysis to do so. My source material for this analysis was official Tzu Chi literature—mainly the book *Purity Begins at the Source*, but also online articles and social media content. After identifying relevant material, I analyzed them inductively, taking what Guest et al. term a “content-driven” (versus “hypothesis-driven”) approach, in which “themes, codes, and items to be recorded are emergent within the data” and no predetermined categories are created.⁴³ I noted important or repeated themes as they arose during my reading of the texts.

To better understand volunteer experiences, I utilized participant observation. Participant observation is particularly fruitful in the study of religion given what the discipline has long been aware of: that is, that sacred texts and religious authorities tell us little about how the rank-and-file interpret and experience faith, particularly as it becomes embodied via practice. By observing the “doing” of religion, in contrast, we may gain insight into these questions.⁴⁴ My participant observation mainly took two forms: attendance at my district’s book club (three times), and attendance at two lectures at the Tzu Chi bookstore. Book club is a weekly event

⁴² Tracy, *Qualitative Research Methods*, 74.

⁴³ Guest, Namey, and Mitchell, *Collecting Qualitative Data*, 274-275.

⁴⁴ Harvey, “Field Research,” 217-218.

where volunteers meet to read works by Cheng Yen, reading a few sections each session and breaking after each to discuss. A testament to its importance in the organization, book club is seen as the best way to introduce others to Tzu Chi and is usually the first event that volunteers invite prospective members to join. Book club is also an important mode of community building. It often seemed to take on the role of support group, as volunteers connected the general aphorisms of Cheng Yen to the minutia of their daily lives, seeking guidance not just in the her words but also in the advice of their co-volunteers. I was surprised at the openness of everyone; not a single volunteer ever appeared shy or hesitant to speak. These were cathartic events that built bonds. Although none of the book club sessions I attended were specifically focused on environmentalism, they still proved a fruitful way to better understand how the organization functions as a group, and how and to what degree volunteer concerns about the environment relate to Tzu Chi's broader ethical worldview.

The lectures also proved useful. Lectures are a regular feature of Tzu Chi's bookstores, themselves important spaces for building and facilitating the movement's growth on the mainland. In Hangzhou, the Tzu Chi bookstore is an attractive, inviting space cozied in at the end of a busy shopping street—I saw more than one idle passerby stop in out of simple curiosity. Tzu Chi bookstores sell Cheng Yen's writings, a variety of lifestyle books (vegetarian cookbooks are particularly popular), and items to support the low-waste lifestyle Tzu Chi promotes, such as reusable chopsticks and thermoses. However, they also double as event spaces for book clubs, training sessions, and lectures. Lectures, usually open to the public, are given by Tzu Chi volunteers from around the world. An on-site café provides space for discussion afterwards. As with book club, the lectures I attended did not focus specifically on the environment; they did, however, provide me with a great deal of material.

As mentioned earlier, I was also invited into my district's WeChat group. The WeChat group is mainly run by and for the benefit of volunteers, but volunteers will invite any curious prospective member to join in as well. Every day a few words of wisdom from Cheng Yen (known in English as the "Jing Si Aphorisms" *jingsi yu* 静思语) are shared, as are cartoons and graphics of an inspirational nature. However, the group can also serve as a discussion space; for instance, volunteers may discuss how a recent event went or solicit advice. I considered my membership

in the group as an opportunity for a kind of “virtual” participant observation. As Silverman writes, the modern expansion of online, text-based communication can be seen as “a whole new field for ethnographic investigation.”⁴⁵ In observing how active the group was, what topics were discussed, and how volunteers interacted with each other, my virtual participant observation was a useful source of material.

Another method I relied on was the interview. Guest et al. present interviews as a continuum in which the degree of structure—or, in other words, the amount of control the interviewer attempts to exercise over the interview—is variable.⁴⁶ Although the three most common terms used to describe interviews are unstructured, semi-structured, and structured, Guest et al. emphasize that these are merely “markers within a range.”⁴⁷ As they write: “On the one extreme are completely unscripted conversations, the type a researcher might have when doing participant observation or at the very beginning of an inquiry when almost nothing is known about a topic. At the other extreme fall highly structured interviews, in which the questions are asked verbatim and response categories are fixed.”⁴⁸ In conducting my interviews, I found myself at multiple points upon this spectrum.

As mentioned earlier, most Tzu Chi volunteers are very willing to speak about their experiences. I found that Tzu Chi events were great opportunities to speak with volunteers. Volunteers were generally curious as to my identity and excited about my project. After attending a lecture, for instance, I would usually be invited to stay for a coffee and talk—perhaps for up to an hour. These spontaneous, in-the-field conversations were incredibly fruitful, though they may only be considered “interviews” in a loose sense. However, I also carried out several semi-structured interviews; equipped with a general interview guide, I had a list of predetermined but open-ended and flexible questions intended to “stimulate discussion rather than dictate it.”⁴⁹ I took this approach because while I did want my informants to touch upon particular topics and themes, I was also trying to capture their presumably variable and likely complex subjective realities—and

⁴⁵Silverman, *Doing Qualitative Research*, 224.

⁴⁶ Guest, Namey, and Mitchell, *Collecting Qualitative Data*, 114-115.

⁴⁷ Guest, Namey, and Mitchell, *Collecting Qualitative Data*, 114-115.

⁴⁸ Guest, Namey, and Mitchell, *Collecting Qualitative Data*, 115.

⁴⁹ Tracy, *Qualitative Research Methods*, 139.

I wanted to hear about these realities in all of their complexity, not constrain my informants' narratives by over-relying on a pre-scripted plan. Ultimately, I conducted seven such interviews. While my goal was to conduct as many interviews as I could until I reached "theoretical saturation"—the point at which new data adds little value to one's emergent analysis⁵⁰—I met with some obstacles along the way.

In retrospect, I was not as proactive about securing interviews as I should have been. In my mind, I had five long months ahead of me and did not need to hurry into conducting interviews. And that was true—I did have quite a good deal of time before me. My informants, however, did not. Like all people, they had a host of personal responsibilities and commitments that limited their free time. The typical Hangzhou volunteer is still middle-aged: not yet retired, they generally work full-time and are often responsible for the care of children and perhaps an elderly parent. In combination with their Tzu Chi commitments, this meant that they were generally quite busy, which I had not fully factored into my plans. Several interviews were abandoned because of last-minute cancellations. Exacerbating the issue was the realization, obvious in retrospect, of just how physically large Hangzhou, like most Chinese cities, is. On multiple occasions I secured an informant's agreement to an interview at their house only to realize that it would take me nearly two hours to reach said house. This made scheduling interviews quite a task, as I would sometimes quite literally require an entire day to conduct one. Several interviews never came to fruition simply because a time could not be arranged. That said, while I do not think I truly reached "theoretical saturation," I do feel that I was well on my way: most of my informants' stories were beginning to sound more similar than different.

Moreover, the interviews themselves suffered in quality from the language barrier. All were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, a language I am still very much learning, as no informants spoke more than minimal English. While volunteers could speak their stories freely, I sometimes worried I was not fully comprehending the significance of what they were telling me, and this further impaired my ability to ask insightful follow-up questions. However, this did get easier with time as volunteers generally brought up the same topics of discussion, and often even used the same words and phrases to describe things. (Du Lijie and Xiao Yan identify, for good reason,

⁵⁰ Tracy, *Qualitative Research Methods*, 195.

a “Tzu-Chi vocabulary” at play within the group, as volunteers often frame their experiences and beliefs in the same language that Cheng Yen uses in her speeches and writings).⁵¹ This allowed me to pick up new vocabulary and phrases relatively quickly.

Finally, a note about my informants’ demographic characteristics, who are largely representative of Hangzhou volunteers as a whole. As mentioned, nearly all fell somewhere between 45-65 years of age, with only one being younger (40). Most were married, with the exception of one widow and one divorcee. They were middle-class, with careers that included nurse, guesthouse proprietor, and insurance salesperson. Almost all had children, and more than one had children studying overseas. There were no Taiwanese. Two were male. Because this lack of significant demographic diversity was obvious from my very first Tzu Chi excursion, I conducted my sampling rather opportunistically, striking up conversations when appropriate and scheduling interviews when I sensed someone might be receptive.

⁵¹ Du Lijie 杜立婕 and Xiao Yan 肖燕, “Zongjiao cishan gongyi zuzhi zhong de ‘gongtongti’: jiyu Ciji jijinhui Shanghai C fenhui de renleixue yanjiu” 宗教慈善公益组织中的 ‘共同体’: 基于慈济基金会上海 C 分会的人类学研究 [‘Community’ in Religious Charitable Organizations: Anthropological Research Based on the Shanghai C Branch of the Tzu Chi Foundation], *Zongjiao shehuixue* 宗教社会学 5 (2018): 158.

Chapter Two: A Buddhism for the Human Realm

Tzu Chi's origin story (which, like much of what surrounds its founder, has become essentially mythologized within the organization) presents Cheng Yen as a radical innovator, using the Western-Christian charitable tradition as inspiration for a new, totally different approach to Buddhism. But while Cheng Yen has certainly had a considerable and innovative influence on Buddhist thought and practice, she was not the first to suggest a more *engaged* model of Buddhism. Her overarching philosophy—that Buddhists can and should act to address the world's problems—has its roots in a body of thought known as “humanistic Buddhism” (*renjian fojiao* 人间佛教), which itself can be understood as a current of “socially engaged Buddhism.” As it is the humanistic, or socially engaged, imperative to act which also motivates Tzu Chi's environmental work, the following section will provide an overview of this tradition so as to better situate Tzu Chi's eco-theology within it.

Socially Engaged Buddhism

Various movements and individuals have been associated with this concept. The Vietnamese anti-war activist-monk Thich Nhat Hanh is often seen as its quintessential exemplar, while later examples include B.R. Ambedkar; the Fourteenth Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso; and in the West, Bernie Glassman. Finding similarity amongst these doctrinally, culturally, and geographically diverse figures and their associated movements, Sallie B. King has defined socially engaged Buddhism as “those forms of Buddhism that intentionally and nonviolently engage with the social, political, economic, and environmental issues of society and the world on the basis of and as an expression of Buddhist beliefs, values, concepts, world view, and practices.”⁵² In practice, practitioners often use these values to form organizations devoted to social activism (such as anti-war activism) or social service (such as to the poor or socially marginalized)—King terms this a “service dharma.”⁵³ Christopher S. Queen, who like King argues for the existence of a

⁵² Sallie B. King, “The Ethics of Engaged Buddhism in Asia,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Buddhist Ethics*, ed. Daniel Cozort and James Mark Shields (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 480, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198746140.013.20>.

⁵³ Christopher S.

unified “socially engaged Buddhism” on the basis of the disparate movements’ shared ethical principles and their commitment to translate these into concrete action, highlights three particular aspects of socially-engaged philosophy. According to Queen, socially engaged Buddhists reinterpret the traditional notions of suffering, action-rebirth, and the Five Precepts in ways that justify an increased engagement with the world’s problems. For instance, most socially-engaged Buddhists reformulate the traditional notion of “suffering” to acknowledge not only its psychological and spiritual causes, but also its political, economic, and social roots as well.⁵⁴ Thus, suffering remains the lot of sentient beings, but its quenching is no longer “the sole responsibility of the sufferer” but of society at large.⁵⁵ However, Jessica L. Main and Rongdao Lai argue that the central feature of socially engaged Buddhism is its rejection of secularization. Secularization, here, is defined as “the exercise of power on the part of secular polities to distinguish between the secular and the religious in ways that undermine the resources and moral legitimacy of religious actors within the secular.”⁵⁶ They argue that it is not “particular forms of ethical action” (such as charity) or “specific ideological commitments” (such as pacifism) that defines socially engaged Buddhism; what defines it instead is “a form of moral reasoning, soteriology, and resistance to secularism—that is, resistance to the modern tendency to restrict religion to the private sphere.”⁵⁷ Thus, socially engaged Buddhism views social activism and social work—work performed within the supposedly “secular” sphere—as legitimate forms of Buddhist practice. In other words, “the modern techniques of social and political action are defined as *Buddhist practices* with soteriological value.”⁵⁸

Humanistic Buddhism

One current of socially engaged Buddhism is the cluster of Chinese movements that grew out of the ideas of the twentieth-century Buddhist reformer Taixu (太虛) and his disciple Yinshun (印

, “Socially Engaged Buddhism: Emerging Patterns of Theory and Practice,” in *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy*, ed. Steven M. Emmanuel (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2013), 533, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118324004.ch34>.

⁵⁴ Queen, “Socially Engaged Buddhism,” 528.

⁵⁵ Queen, “Socially Engaged Buddhism,” 529.

⁵⁶ Jessica L. Main and Rongdao Lai, “Introduction: Reformulating ‘Socially Engaged Buddhism’ as an Analytical Category,” *The Eastern Buddhist* 44, no. 2 (2013): 4, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44362566>.

⁵⁷ Main and Lai, “Introduction,” 7.

⁵⁸ Main and Lai, “Introduction,” 12.

顺) (with the latter also being responsible for ordaining Cheng Yen in 1962). Known today as humanistic Buddhism, the development of this school of thought can be seen as a reaction to the social and political pressures Buddhism faced as China embarked on its quest for modernity. Stereotyped as corrupt, useless, and superstitious by Christian missionaries, government officials, and the people themselves, the monastic community at this time developed a keen fear of being seen as unfit for modernity.⁵⁹ From roughly the 1920s to the 1940s, Taixu and other monks attacked these stereotypes by promoting a version of Buddhism that was “legitimately enmeshed in society.”⁶⁰ Terming his philosophy “Buddhism for human life,” (*rensheng fojiao* 人生佛教), Taixu suggested a Buddhism that emphasized the rationalization of belief, the necessity of social responsibility, and “the modern notions of reform, progress, and moral universalism.”⁶¹ Taixu emphasized that modern Buddhism should center not on “ghosts” (*gui* 鬼) and “death” (*si* 死) (i.e., the afterworld and the performance of funerary services) but on “humans” (*ren* 人) and “life” (*sheng* 生) (i.e., the betterment of human society through social service).⁶² A key idea here was the idea of building a Pure Land on Earth (*renjian jingtu* 人间净土). According to Mahāyāna teachings, pure lands are places free from the three defilements (*fannao* 烦恼): hatred, desire, and delusion.⁶³ While there was a body of thought known as “mind-only pure land” (*weixin jingtu* 唯心净土), which deemphasized the actual physical materiality of pure lands and identified them instead with pure minds, other teachings promoted the interpretation of pure lands as distinct, physical realms.⁶⁴ Historically, the most popular of these has been Amitābha’s Western Paradise (*jile jingtu* 极乐净土). The *Sutra of Immeasurable Life* (*wuliang shoujing* 无量寿经) tells of how, before obtaining Buddhahood, Amitābha vowed to work for the liberation of all sentient beings by establishing a pure land where, free from the influence of the three poisons, unenlightened beings could more easily practice and attain enlightenment. All that is needed to

⁵⁹ Main and Lai, “Introduction,” 14.

⁶⁰ Main and Lai, “Introduction,” 15.

⁶¹ Ji Zhe, “Zhao Puchu and His Renjian Buddhism,” *The Eastern Buddhist* 44, no. 2 (2013): 36, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44362567>.

⁶² Zhe, “Zhao Puchu,” 36.

⁶³ Don A. Pittman, *Toward a Modern Chinese Buddhism: Taixu’s Reforms* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2001), 222.

⁶⁴ Jens Reinke, “Innovation and Continuity in the Pure Lands: Pure Land Discourses and Practices at the Taiwanese Buddhist Order Dharma Drum Mountain,” *Journal of Chinese Buddhist Studies* 30 (2017): 175, [http://chinesebuddhiststudies.org/previous_issues/jcbs3005_Reinke\(169-210\)_e.pdf](http://chinesebuddhiststudies.org/previous_issues/jcbs3005_Reinke(169-210)_e.pdf).

be reborn in Amitābha's pure land is sincere faith in him and a genuine desire to do so. Over time, the practice of calling on Amitābha (*nianfo* 念佛) to ensure a more fortuitous rebirth became the crux of many a believer's practice, and during Taixu's time it was in fact the dominant form.⁶⁵

Taixu, however, found this reliance on Amitābha to be passive and unproductive. In his writings, Taixu reinterpreted the concept of the pure land to suggest that by reforming society in line with Buddhist principles, a pure land could instead be realized here on Earth.⁶⁶ Identifying the development of Buddhist charity as a key means of doing this, Taixu participated in and advocated for Buddhist charity in the form of, particularly, orphanages, schools, and hospitals.⁶⁷ For, Taixu argued, the true basis of a pure land is a pure mind. He wrote: "If today, based on good knowledge of our minds, we can produce pure thoughts and work hard to accomplish good deeds, how hard can it be to transform an impure China into a Chinese pure land?"⁶⁸ To remove desire, delusion, and hatred from the world, one needed to cultivate a pure mind by carrying out compassionate action. In these calls to action, Taixu drew on another traditional Mahāyāna notion: that of the bodhisattva. The bodhisattva has long been a central and important theme in both Chinese Buddhist literature and the popular imagination.⁶⁹ In Sanskrit, "bodhi" means "awakening," and "sattva" is a living being; together, the term suggests one who is working towards enlightenment, but who also enlightens others.⁷⁰ As beings who delay enlightenment to assist others along the path toward it, they are known as wise, powerful beings of boundless compassion. In China, four bodhisattvas have been singled out as the objects of particular devotion: Wenshu (文殊), Dizang (地藏), Guanyin (观音), and Puxian (普贤). Each of these beings became associated with particular traits, powers, and even locales, as unique imagery,

⁶⁵ Pittman, *Toward*, 202.

⁶⁶ Pittman, *Toward*, 222.

⁶⁷ Li Ming 李明, "Taixu dashi yu fojiao cishan" 太虚大师与佛教慈善 [Master Taixu and Buddhist Charity], *Huanggang zhiye jishu xueyuan xuebao* 黄冈职业技术学院学报 13, no. 5 (2011): 55, <https://doi.org/DOI:10.3969/j.issn.1672-1047.2011.05.13>.

⁶⁸ Taixu 太虚, *Taixu dashi quanshu* 太虚大师全书 [*The Complete Works of the Venerable Master Taixu*] (Taipei, 1956), quoted in Pittman, *Toward*, 224.

⁶⁹ Pittman, *Toward*, 198.

⁷⁰ Natasha Heller, "Bodhisattva Cults in Chinese Buddhism," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to East and Inner Asian Buddhism*, ed. Mario Poceski (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2014), 221.

rituals, narratives, and eventually cults grew up around them.⁷¹ Over time they became known as salvific figures, known for their interventions in the human world.⁷²

At the same time, however, the salvific nature of the bodhisattva raised questions within the monastic community. As Don A. Pittman argues, Chinese Buddhism saw competing ideas about whether bodhisattvas best be understood as supernatural beings offering salvation or as aspirational models for human believers.⁷³ Does one take a path of “dependence” by entrusting their salvation to a bodhisattva—through, for example, Pure Land practice—or should one set out on the path of “self-reliance” by using bodhisattvas as models as they strive to become one themselves?⁷⁴ While most monastics during the late Qing and Republican periods in fact judged the two ideas to be complementary, Taixu’s opinion on the matter was less accommodating. As Pittman writes, “Taixu...asserted that too many lay devotees and too many monks were satisfied with the passive way of dependence without understanding its profound doctrinal basis or the value of the active way.”⁷⁵ In his works Taixu elaborated further on what this meant. True compassion was turning this earth into a pure land, and that could only be accomplished if the rank-and-file dedicated themselves to becoming bodhisattvas themselves. To do so meant taking action to remedy social ills; it was service that became, in Taixu’s eyes, the embodiment of the “active” way.

Of course, this is not to say that there was no history of charity or service within Chinese Buddhism before Taixu’s reforms. China has a rich history of religiously inspired philanthropy, and Buddhism has played a significant role in this. “Giving” (*bushi* 布施) has traditionally been an esteemed virtue in Buddhism, being seen as an expression of compassion and a way to gain merit and secure a fortuitous rebirth. Laity were of course encouraged to provide material support to the sangha, but Laliberté, Palmer, and Wu also argue that the tradition’s emphasis on compassion was a driving force behind the development of philanthropy more broadly in China.

⁷¹ Heller, “Bodhisattva Cults,” 221.

⁷² Heller, “Bodhisattva Cults,” 222.

⁷³ Pittman, *Toward*, 200.

⁷⁴ Pittman, *Toward*, 201.

⁷⁵ Pittman, *Toward*, 201.

Lay Buddhists began setting up philanthropic institutions during the late Qing, for instance.⁷⁶ And although it was understood that the monastic community could “give” to the laity through the transmission of the dharma and performance of rituals, Jacques Gernet documents how charitable monks would also, for instance, provide gruel for the poor in times of famine.⁷⁷ However, Gernet also emphasizes that much of this charity was done on the initiative of individual monks, and was not a characteristic feature of the monastic community as a whole.⁷⁸ By suggesting that the core of Buddhist practice (both that of the sangha and of the laity) should be this-worldly service, Taixu radically re-oriented the course and form of modern Chinese Buddhism.

After Taixu’s death in 1947, his philosophy was further developed by Yinshun. Arriving in Taiwan in 1952, Yinshun published several works on Taixu’s ideas in which he expanded upon the idea of humanistic Buddhism as social welfare (during this time Taixu’s original term *rensheng* was gradually replaced by *renjian*).⁷⁹ Yinshun’s understanding of pure lands and of the bodhisattva were largely in line with Taixu’s; however, he would ultimately criticize Taixu for not attacking the salvation-oriented veneration of buddhas and other such celestial beings *enough*.⁸⁰ Despite their long history of cultural importance, Yinshun argued that bodhisattvas in particular did not deserve veneration, because although their work was admirable, they had simply attained a state of being that was attainable by all beings. In attacking bodhisattva worship, Yinshun strengthened Taixu’s claim that the realization of a pure land was in the hands of everyday, ordinary people.

Taiwan’s Humanistic Buddhists and the Environment

In sum, Taixu and Yinshun promoted a uniquely modern form of Buddhist practice, one that sought to transcend the modern division of the “secular” and the “religious” by imagining charity

⁷⁶ André Laliberté, David A. Palmer, and Keping Wu, “Religious Philanthropy and Chinese Civil Society,” in *Chinese Religious Life*, ed. David A. Palmer, Glenn Shive, and Philip L. Wickeri (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 142-143, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199731398.003.0009>.

⁷⁷ Jacques Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society: An Economic History from the Fifth to the Tenth Centuries*, trans. Franciscus Verellen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 219-221.

⁷⁸ Gernet, *Buddhism*, 219.

⁷⁹ Zhe, “Zhao Puchu,” 37.

⁸⁰ Pittman, *Toward*, 204.

and social work as legitimate forms of Buddhist practice. This humanistic call to serve was rationalized through a reworking of traditional notions about pure lands and of the bodhisattva: both became of this realm. These teachings came to have a profound influence on the development of Buddhism in Taiwan. While further development of humanistic Buddhism was initially constrained in the PRC due to political factors (Taixu had had close ties to the KMT),⁸¹ it flourished in Taiwan, where it has in fact been credited with the country's Buddhist revival.⁸² With rapid economic development and the lifting of martial law in 1987, civil society blossomed and humanistic Buddhism spread rapidly. In addition to Tzu Chi, Taiwan today is home to five other sizable humanistic movements: Fo Guang Shan, Fagushan, Chung Tai Chan, Ling Jiou Shan, and Fu-chih.⁸³ Together, these groups claim over 20% of Taiwan's adult population as members.⁸⁴ Each identifies itself as a humanistic movement, and, though they do so in various ways and to varying degrees, has a commitment to service and charity with the aim of transforming the world into a pure land on Earth. While these groups take direct inspiration from Taixu and Yinshun, they have nonetheless also expanded their work in one significant way: with the exception of Chung Tai Chan, each has made a demonstrated commitment to environmentalism. Fu-chih (founded in 1987 by the Venerable Jih Chang) is a strong promoter of organic foods, with Jih Chang establishing the Compassion Organic Agriculture Foundation to protect both human health and the natural environment.⁸⁵ Ling Jiou Shan (founded 1989-1990 by the Venerable Xindao) regularly sponsors environmental activities such as water cleanups.⁸⁶ Similar to Tzu Chi, Fo Guang Shan (founded by the Venerable Hsing Yun in 1967) has an extensive recycling program.⁸⁷ Fagushan (founded by the Venerable Sheng Yen in 1989) advocates for protection of the natural environment as part of protecting the "spiritual environment," or the mind.⁸⁸

⁸¹ Zhe, "Zhao Puchu," 37.

⁸² David Schak and Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao, "Taiwan's Socially Engaged Buddhist Groups," *China Perspectives* 59 (2005): 2, <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/2803>.

⁸³ Schak and Hsiao, "Taiwan's Socially Engaged," 1-2.

⁸⁴ Schak and Hsiao, "Taiwan's Socially Engaged," 1.

⁸⁵ Schak and Hsiao, "Taiwan's Socially Engaged," 9.

⁸⁶ Schak and Hsiao, "Taiwan's Socially Engaged," 11.

⁸⁷ Schak and Hsiao, "Taiwan's Socially Engaged," 14.

⁸⁸ Schak and Hsiao, "Taiwan's Socially Engaged," 7.

In fact, there has been significant scholarly interest in the question of how and to what degree religious worldviews shape environmental behaviors. Most notably, Lynn White suggested in a highly influential 1967 article that the growing ecological crisis could be attributed to the legacy of Western Christianity, which, he argued, was brazenly anthropocentric.⁸⁹ In the years following White's provocative thesis, a growing number of scholars and environmental activists have engaged with his claim that both the reason for, and the answer to, environmental crisis lies within religion.⁹⁰ A recent major study by Prasenjit Duara, which blames ecological crisis on the loss of what he terms "authoritative sources of transcendence" such as those found within traditional religions and cosmologies, posits that Asian traditions may be a source of alternative, more sustainable, visions of how to live.⁹¹ Agreeing with Duara's view, many have seized in particular upon the possible affinity of Buddhism with such visions of sustainability. Proponents of this view argue that the tradition puts forth a more holistic worldview which, through teachings such as dependent origination and nonduality, "dethrones humanity from the center of the universe."⁹² However, several scholars have also cautioned against essentializing Buddhism as inherently eco-friendly. In fact, it has been argued that the idea of a "green" Buddhism is largely a modern phenomenon.⁹³ As Chengpang Lee and Ling Han argue, not only does the singular term "Buddhism" cover a vast array of teachings and texts, but "teachings and texts do not automatically lead to environmental activism."⁹⁴ Buddhist environmentalism, they argue, must not be taken for granted but be examined carefully.⁹⁵ At the same time, however, it is evident that Taiwan's humanistic Buddhist groups have begun engaging, actively, with the growing environmental crisis. Moreover, the movement with the largest presence in mainland China, Tzu Chi, has also made environmental work one of its most regular and sustained forms of engagement there, raising the question of whether this new environmentalism may influence mainland Buddhists. Despite this, analysis of Taiwan's humanistic Buddhists and

⁸⁹ Bron Taylor, "The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part One): From Lynn White, Jr and Claims That Religions Can Promote Environmentally Destructive Attitudes and Behaviors to Assertions They Are Becoming Environmentally Friendly," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 10, no. 3 (2016): 270, doi: 10.1558/jsrnc.v10i3.29010.

⁹⁰ Taylor, "The Greening," 292.

⁹¹ Prasenjit Duara, *The Crisis of Global Modernity: Asian Traditions and a Sustainable Future* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 1-2.

⁹² Lee and Han, "Recycling," 314.

⁹³ Lee and Han, "Recycling," 314.

⁹⁴ Lee and Han, "Recycling," 314.

⁹⁵ Lee and Han, "Recycling," 314.

environmentalism is scarce.⁹⁶ In the following sections, I will take a closer look at how a specifically humanistic movement—Tzu Chi—understands, both at the level of theory and of practice, environmentalism as a worthwhile endeavor for its volunteers. I will first examine what Tzu Chi’s eco-theology teaches about individual responsibility for, and responses to, environmental crisis. Tzu Chi, I argue, has a robust and well-developed eco-theology, with concern for the environment consciously woven into the organization’s broader ethical worldview. This eco-theology engages not only with the Buddhist tradition but also with uniquely modern trends in contemporary Chinese religious philanthropy; in doing so, it broadens the scope of humanistic Buddhist action by imagining global environmental activism as another legitimate area of humanistic service.

⁹⁶ One useful exception is Jeffrey Nicolaisen’s study of Fagushan, which analyzes Sheng Yen’s “spiritual environmentalism” as an alliance of traditional Buddhist notions and modern environmental science. See: Jeffrey Nicolaisen, “The Intersection of Sentient Beings and Species, Tradition and Modern, in the Practices and Doctrine of Dharma Drum Mountain,” in *Chinese Environmental Humanities: Practices of Environing at the Margins*, ed. Chia-Ju Chang (Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2019), 291, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.uio.no/lib/oslo/detail.action?docID=5846563#>.

Chapter Three: How to Purify a Polluted World

The previous chapter has attempted to locate Tzu Chi, theologically, within the larger context of humanistic Buddhism that gave rise to it. Cheng Yen, like many of her contemporaries, has been deeply influenced by the humanistic teachings of Taixu and Yinshun—teachings that center on active engagement with the world’s problems. However, Tzu Chi and its peer organizations have also expanded the appropriate areas of Buddhist action to include environmental activism. I was curious as to what kind of eco-theology Tzu Chi espouses and, in particular, how it relates individual behavior, and thus responsibility, to global environmental crisis. Material for this section comes primarily from the Tzu Chi publication *Purity Begins at the Source* (清淨在源头), with supplementary material coming from articles published on Tzu Chi’s various websites.

The Cause of Environmental Crisis

Something that sets Tzu Chi, a Buddhist FBO, apart from secular environmental NGOs is the way in which it draws upon traditional Buddhist notions to explain the cause and cure of environmental crisis. Most fundamentally, Tzu Chi teaches that environmental crisis is a reflection of spiritual crisis: in a way that reflects the organization’s Buddhist character, Tzu Chi presents several of the key drivers of ecological destruction as manifestations of unchecked human desire. Specifically, rampant consumerism and the consumption of meat are identified as manifestations of avaricious, “polluted” minds, and thus reasons for our polluted Earth. In regard to the consumption of material goods, Cheng Yen encourages her followers to reflect on how individual acts contribute to globally unsustainable levels of consumption. Thinking about the energy and resources that go into every manufactured product, she urges, even the environmental impact of a pair of chopsticks should not be underestimated.⁹⁷ Although recycling is now well-established on the island, Taiwan previously had such a waste disposal problem that protests over landfill placements—the so-called “garbage wars”—became a frequent occurrence in the

⁹⁷ Cheng Yen 释证严, *Qingjing zai yuantou* 清淨在源头[Purity Begins at the Source] (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 2013), 20. [以生活方面而言, 个人一天衣·食·住·行·所用的物资有多少? 仔细计算也很客观, 大家要爱惜天地万物, 不论任何东西, 都要疼惜它, 即使是一双筷子也不要看轻它对大地的影响]

1980s.⁹⁸ Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, Cheng Yen often focuses in on this visible, highly tangible environmental problem in her calls for reduced consumption. She teaches that garbage exists because of greed: the desire for newer, better things leads people to throw away perfectly useable items and justify new purchases. The problem, she writes, is that “People can easily obtain, but don’t know how to cherish...most simply use and discard.”⁹⁹ To illustrate this point, Cheng Yen recounts an anecdote of coming upon a row of beautiful tables and chairs at a Tzu Chi recycling station. Reaching out to touch them, she is struck by the quality craftsmanship. To be thrown out, she muses, simply because they are a bit old and dirty!¹⁰⁰ Of course, Tzu Chi is not alone in advocating for reduced consumption: in recent years, a growing number of activists have begun addressing the environmental impacts of consumption at the individual and household levels. For instance, the idea that each of us has a “climate footprint” directly related to the quantity and characteristics of what we consume has grown in popularity.¹⁰¹ Yet Tzu Chi differs in how it specifically frames its conversations around consumption in terms of “desire”—harkening back to the Buddhist tradition, in which desire (*tan* 贪), along with hate (*chen* 嗔) and ignorance (*chi* 痴), make up the “three poisons” (*sandu* 三毒) which together keep sentient beings trapped in *samsāra*. Of course, Tzu Chi also reflects the innovation of socially engaged movements in the way it broadens the consequences of desire. It not only keeps the individual mired in suffering but also has consequences for all of humanity.¹⁰² This can be seen, for instance, in Tzu Chi’s linkage between desire and natural disasters. Cheng Yen writes: “However, natural crises are often caused by human greed. If you blindly think about pursuing pleasure and success, and constantly harm living beings and the earth, and excessively consume natural resources, this will cause a great deal of harm.”¹⁰³ Desire creates a “consumption-oriented” mindset, and because these desires are “endless,” so is any resulting environmental fallout.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁸ Robert P. Weller, *Discovering Nature: Globalization and Environmental Culture in China and Taiwan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 107.

⁹⁹ Cheng Yen, *Purity*, 6. [人们容易取得反而不知珍惜...许多人用了就丢]

¹⁰⁰ Cheng Yen, *Purity*, 18.

¹⁰¹ For example, see: Karen Ehrhardt-Martinez et.al, “Consumption and Climate Change,” in *Climate Change and Society: Sociological Perspectives*, ed. Riley E. Dunlap and Robert J. Brulle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 22.

¹⁰² Queen, “Socially Engaged Buddhism,” 531.

¹⁰³ Cheng Yen, *Purity*, 53. [然而大自然的危机，往往起自人的一念贪，倘若一味考虑自己追求享受、成就事业，不断地损害众生与大地，无度地耗用自然资源，则会造成许多损人不利己的危害]

¹⁰⁴ Cheng Yen, *Purity*, 19. [人往往为了“欲”，而产生消耗心态；然而欲念没有止尽，购买无度，而后再丢弃成为垃圾.]

Tzu Chi also teaches on consumption as it relates to food practices. The organization advocates for a simple, vegetarian diet, with the consumption of meat being linked again to unchecked desire. This is first rationalized from a traditional Buddhist perspective on animal ethics. As Cheng Yen writes:

What is the purpose of being born in the human realm? Is it just to satisfy our desires? How many living beings have to be harmed for a momentary taste or sensation? Buddhist scriptures often remind us that there are six realms of existence; among this is the realm of the animals; that in addition to humans there are all sorts of creatures with consciousness. The Buddha said: "All sentient beings have buddha-nature."¹⁰⁵

However, desire for meat is also unethical due to its environmental footprint. Cheng Yen writes:

In our daily lives, we should be grateful and frugal, and practice what we preach to save energy and reduce carbon [footprints]; for example, if you substitute vegetarian fare for meat, there's no need to cut down forests to build pastures; furthermore, you can reduce the large amount of carbon emissions produced by raising livestock.¹⁰⁶

In its prohibitions against excessive consumption, Tzu Chi includes the consumption of meat—not just because it is ethically dubious to take the life of a creature with buddha-nature, but also because meat is resource intensive and polluting to produce. In doing so, Tzu Chi here integrates modern environmental science into its ethical worldview, reflecting broader trends in modern Chinese Buddhism in which Buddhists are, as Jakob Klein found in his study of vegetarian restaurants in Kunming, increasingly drawing upon not only traditional messages of “karmic retribution and the protection of life” but also “scientific arguments about nutrition, environment and food security.”¹⁰⁷ And again, the consequences of desire here transcend the harm done to the individual animal to include that done to our global climate.

¹⁰⁵ Cheng Yen, *Purity*, 110-111. [我们生来人间目的为何？只是为了满足口欲吗？为了一时的滋味、口感，伤害多少生灵。佛典中常常提醒我们有六道轮回，其中之一是畜生道，即是人类以外各种各类有知觉的生命；佛陀说：“蠢动含灵皆有佛性。”]

¹⁰⁶ Cheng Yen, *Purity*, 109. [日常生活中应惜福、节俭，身体力行节能减碳；诸如以素食取代肉食，就不必为了辟建牧场而砍伐树林，还能减少畜牧过程所造成的大量碳排放，对身体而言也是较为健康的饮食方式]

¹⁰⁷ Jakob A. Klein, “Buddhist Vegetarian Restaurants and the Changing Meanings of Meat in Urban China,” *Ethnos* 82, no. 2 (March 2017): 268, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2015.1084016>.

The Cure for Environmental Crisis

Despite the urgency it attributes to the situation, Tzu Chi nonetheless presents the current environmental crisis as fundamentally solvable. The answer, Tzu Chi teaches, lies in purifying the individual mind through practices of cultivation. The idea of cultivating the self has a long history and important place in Buddhist practice, with various techniques developed to assist in this. Sutra chanting, for instance, has long been used as a way to cultivate mindfulness. For Cheng Yen, cultivation is any practice that helps one to do away with afflictions (*xiaochu fannao* 消除烦恼) and correct their behavior (*duanzheng xingwei* 端正行为) so that it accords with the buddha-dharma. Because of this, the mindful practice of every-day eco-friendly behaviors—including the core of Tzu Chi’s environmental mission, recycling—becomes a way to lessen the avarice that leads to unsustainable consumption.

The primary way to cultivate a less desirous self is recycling. This is seen most obviously in how recycling stations are described as *daochang* (道场). Although *daochang* can be translated as “temple,” its true meaning is broader and more akin to “a place of the way,” or a place for practice. For a recycling station to become a place of practice, recycling itself must be transformed, too: from the mundane activity most of us see it as to a form of spiritual practice. To help volunteers imagine how the act of sorting garbage can be transformative, Cheng Yen references the idea of the “five strengths” (*wuli* 五力), qualities conducive to enlightenment. These are faith (*xinli* 信力), which destroys doubt; zeal (*jingjinli* 精進力), which destroys laziness; mindfulness (*nian* 念), which destroys heedlessness; concentration (*zhengdingli* 正定力), which destroys distraction; and wisdom, (*huili* 慧力) which destroys delusion. According to Cheng Yen, the proper use of these faculties will benefit both human hearts and the physical earth, and moreover, recycling can develop them.¹⁰⁸ The elderly volunteer who goes to the recycling station each morning is embodying “faith” by trusting in the value of doing good work; “zeal” by her active dedication; and “mindfulness” by her careful attention to her work. “Concentration” comes from not allowing one’s self to be distracted by calls to rest or relax,

¹⁰⁸ Cheng Yen, *Purity*, 183.

while “wisdom” comes from humbling one’s self and “stooping low” to sort through trash.¹⁰⁹ In short, recycling is a chance to reflect on Tzu Chi’s environmental mission, and in turn nurture a more mindful self.

However, cultivation does not only happen at the recycling station. The conscious performance of everyday eco-friendly behaviors is also a form of practice. In fact, one of the touted benefits of recycling is that it motivates volunteers to “discipline themselves to adopt a thrifty lifestyle and do their best to appreciate the resources that they use.”¹¹⁰ This is given importance because although Tzu Chi advocates for recycling, the ideal is still to consume less. This can be done by putting into practice the twin concepts of cherishing (*xi* 惜) and extending (*xu* 续) the life of objects (*wuming* 物命). One should use an item until it is truly unusable, because by cherishing and extending life, demands for the production of new products is lessened. Or, as Cheng Yen puts it, “Environmental protection is not only treasuring and extending the life of things, but also about extending the life of the earth.”¹¹¹ And again, these actions are considered deeply transformative for the individual. For instance, Tzu Chi heavily promotes the “5 Rs”: refuse, reduce, reuse, repair, recycle. By practicing the 5Rs—refusing a pair of disposable chopsticks in lieu of bringing your own, perhaps—one can practice restraint and self-discipline. This is important, because as Cheng Yen writes, “Everyone has a field to cultivate inside their minds. You must first weed it before you sow the seeds...Only when that mental field is clear of weeds can the seeds of wisdom take root. This is spiritual cultivation.”¹¹² The mindful attempt to eliminate bad habits is essential to gaining a greater understanding of one’s responsibility for, and role in offsetting, environmental degradation.

Keeping a vegetarian diet is presented as a form of cultivation, too. Here, however, a greater emphasis is placed on its ability to develop what Cheng Yen terms the “compassionate heart” (*cibei xin* 慈悲心). Cheng Yen writes:

¹⁰⁹ Cheng Yen, *Purity*, 183-184.

¹¹⁰ Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation, “A Life of Quality and Value,” April 25, 2008, http://www.tzuchi.org.tw/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=346:a-life-of-quality-andvalue&catid=104:great-love-after-asia-tsunami&Itemid=277.

¹¹¹ Cheng Yen, *Purity*, 19. [做环保不仅是疼惜物命、延长物命，同时也延长地球的寿命]

¹¹² Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation, “A Life.”

If everyone changes their eating habits and eats more grains, vegetables, and fruits, not only will their health benefit, but it will not be necessary to raise such a large amount of livestock and produce pollution; it will also foster a compassionate heart that protects and cares for living beings and cherishes animals. It is truly a good way to save the earth and offset the greenhouse effect.”¹¹³

The power of the vegetarian fast (*zhaijie* 斋戒) is great enough that one can learn to be “selfless” and to “sincerely love and respect all things in this world” from it.¹¹⁴ Again, traditional Buddhist proscriptions against eating meat are invoked by Cheng Yen’s call to “cherish” animals, but eating meat is also linked to another kind of harm: ecological destruction. Cheng Yen makes frequent mention of the natural disasters that will escalate if climate change is not reversed, and when doing so she often draws attention to the suffering (human and non-human) that will result from this. A compassionate heart will naturally seek to limit the pain of others, and one can develop this faculty by reflecting on the consequences of ecological damage. Each refusal to eat meat is a chance to reflect on these linkages, and to turn cravings into compassion.

Environmentalism as Religious Philanthropy

The above section has explored how Tzu Chi engages with the Buddhist tradition to make sense of modern environmental crisis and its possible solutions. Although most of what Tzu Chi promotes is quite mainstream among environmental advocates, it differs from secular organizations in its Buddhist framing. To better understand Tzu Chi’s eco-theology, however, we must also look at how Tzu Chi engages with another “tradition”: that of Chinese religious philanthropy. Tzu Chi’s eco-theology reflects several modern trends in Chinese religious philanthropy, particularly in how it relates the ideas of individual agency and global responsibility. As discussed earlier, there is a long history of religiously motivated philanthropy in China. However, the shape this has taken has shifted over time. Most pertinently, philanthropy in contemporary Chinese societies has become disembedded from the limited, local communities

¹¹³ Cheng Yen, *Purity*, 116. [人人改变饮食习惯，多食用五谷杂粮及蔬果，既有益自身健康，又不必畜养大量牲畜，产生污染，也能培养爱护生命、疼惜动物的慈悲心，正是救地球、缓和温室效应的好方法]

¹¹⁴ Cheng Yen, *Purity*, 117. [虔诚斋戒，所创造善的力量很大。一念纯真无私，虔诚敬爱天地万物，就从自己的生活习惯开始]

(such as native-place and kinship groups) that it historically centered upon and replaced with a system in which autonomous individuals act on behalf of a universalized public good. Writing about philanthropy in China, Taiwan, and Malaysia, Weller et al. argue that charity has been dominated by one particular model of “doing good,” which they term “industrialized philanthropy.”¹¹⁵ Industrialized philanthropy is large-scale, rationalized and bureaucratized, and, unlike before, disembedded from local social networks and reliant instead on a new kind of self. This new sense of self is more autonomous, espouses cosmopolitan notions of a “universal” goodness, and dedicates time and money in the name of these values.¹¹⁶ This goodness, which Weller et al. term the “unlimited good,” centers on love, a concept that has been increasingly emphasized by religious groups of all denominations in recent decades.¹¹⁷ “Love,” as understood by these organizations, is all-encompassing; it transcends boundaries, be these of local communities or of the nation-state.¹¹⁸ Although Weller et al.’s other points about industrialized philanthropy hold true for Tzu Chi—it is certainly large, and it is definitely bureaucratized—I would like to focus on how Tzu Chi’s eco-theology presents environmentalism as an expression of this kind of universal love.

The notion of an individual responsibility to a global good is persistently reflected in Tzu Chi’s eco-theology; most fundamentally, it presents environmentalism as an expression of *da ai* 大爱 (usually translated as either “great” or “universal” love) that can remedy the widespread suffering caused by climate-linked natural disasters. What is *da ai* then? Both the names of Da Ai TV (Tzu Chi’s media platform) and Da Ai Technology (its manufacturer of recycled goods) reflect its importance to the organization. It is a guiding value, one that, as Du and Xiao write, is meant to be “suffused continuously throughout volunteers’ every word and every action.”¹¹⁹ This is despite the fact that Buddhism has not traditionally given “love” the prominence that

¹¹⁵ Robert P. Weller, C. Julia Huang, Keping Wu, and Lizhu Fan, *Religion and Charity: The Social Life of Goodness in Chinese Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

¹¹⁶ Weller, Huang, Wu, and Fan, *Religion and Charity*, 2.

¹¹⁷ Weller, Huang, Wu, and Fan, *Religion and Charity*, 120.

¹¹⁸ Weller, Huang, Wu, and Fan, *Religion and Charity*, 121.

¹¹⁹ Du and Xiao, “Community,” 160-161.

Christianity has, due to its associations with attachment and desire.¹²⁰ And as Weller et al. identify, it is intended to be a universal love, unlimited in scope. Cheng Yen writes:

When we have selfish love, a love that is restricted to only certain people, we have a lot of attachments which cause us much suffering. But Great Love—love that extends to all—can liberate us from suffering and give us true peace and joy. This love is what Tzu Chi volunteers practice as they dedicate themselves to caring for people with compassion. No matter who those people may be, they respect and love them equally and try to help them through their hard times. This is the enlightened love of a bodhisattva.¹²¹

Tzu Chi clearly distinguishes between different kinds of love. While harkening back to Buddhism’s traditional association of love with suffering, it nonetheless presents an alternative kind that is in fact freedom from this. This love is nurtured through charitable service, and importantly, its object is any being in need. This can be seen immediately in the transnational character of its service. Tzu Chi has branches in 51 countries¹²²; while membership can often “indigenize” over time, as it has in the PRC, local Tzu Chi branches are generally founded and developed on the initiative of overseas Taiwanese. Cheng Yen’s teaching on giving without distinction encourages her volunteers, as Weishan Huang puts it, “to cross the boundaries of their ethnocentric living experiences and respond to local needs.”¹²³

However, *da ai* is also about loving the earth. One Tzu Chi campaign states that to do environmental protection is to “Respect Heaven, Love the Earth, and Reap Blessings.” To respect Heaven is to respect the natural order of things—which greed violates by causing climate disorder and natural disasters—and to demonstrate “unselfish *da ai*”; this kindness will become “a force of love.”¹²⁴ To love the Earth, Cheng Yen continues, is to “think of every person whose

¹²⁰ Weishan Huang, “The Discourse and Practice of a Buddhist Cosmopolitanism: Transnational Migrants and Tzu Chi Movement,” in *Cosmopolitanism, Religion and the Public Sphere*, ed. Maria Rovisco and Sebastian Kim (New York: Routledge, 2014), 25.

¹²¹ Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation, “Seize Every Second,” May 11, 2009, http://tw.tzuchi.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=182%3Aseize-every-second&catid=82%3Amiscellaneous&Itemid=326&lang=en.

¹²² Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation, “Tzu Chi Global Branch Offices.”

¹²³ Huang, “The Discourse,” 25.

¹²⁴ Cheng Yen, *Purity*, 41. [近年来，我们提倡“敬天爱地聚福缘”因为万物众生都居住在“天盖之下，地载之上。”“敬天”就是顺天时、应天理，照顾好自我的一念心，提起道德理念，展现无私大爱。俗云：“举头三尺有神祇”疼惜大地万物，就能培养一念善心，不仅是人生最虔诚的心，也是一分爱的力量]

feet walk upon it, and be grateful to it for bearing such burden and humiliation.”¹²⁵ The reason for this is simple: earth is our home, and thus “our wellbeing is intimately connected to the wellbeing of Mother Earth...her fate and ours are intertwined.”¹²⁶ Because of this, any harm we subject Mother Earth to will also cause widespread human suffering in the form of climate disruption and natural disasters. Importantly, the responsibility to “take care” of the earth is presented as a global one. Those who ignore the shared nature of this responsibility are criticized as practicing not selfless *da ai* but selfish parochial love. Cheng Yen writes about the garbage wars:

Garbage was piling up like mountains; government bodies wanted to set up new landfills but were fought by local residents everywhere they tried; people dumped garbage in front of public government offices in protest. Similar news is also often reported in foreign countries. For example, in recent years a mountain of garbage in Italy has become overfilled with trash. The government has ordered it closed and for another landfill to be opened. However, this has been delayed by local residents’ resistance...Everyone is reluctant to have a mountain of garbage near their home, but in fact garbage is produced by people. If we were all willing to take on responsibility for this, then how could we even have a problem with garbage?”¹²⁷

The pivot here from Taiwan to Italy is a useful reminder to Taiwanese or Chinese volunteers that waste is a global problem. Does relocating a landfill or polluting factory from your neighborhood to another’s really solve the problem? Viewing that as a solution is selfish; instead of insulating one’s self from the consequences of ecologically unsound behavior, it is better engender change that solves the problem for all. This kind of universal concern stands in contrast with the NIMBY (“Not in My Backyard”) style environmentalism that dominated Taiwanese environmentalism in its early days. This reactive environmentalism focused on local pollution issues—the “garbage wars,” but also the pollution-linked health issues and damaged livelihoods that had arisen as a result of Taiwan’s rapid industrialization—with groups forming in response to concrete issues

¹²⁵ Cheng Yen, *Purity*, 42. [“爱地”，就是要造福人群；想想每个人双脚能踏在土地上，要知恩——感恩大地的负重忍辱]

¹²⁶ Tzu Chi USA, “Becoming a Disciple,” November 15, 2019, <https://tzuchi.us/blog/becoming-a-disciple>.

¹²⁷ Cheng Yen, *Purity*, 5. [垃圾囤积如山，公家机关要增设垃圾掩埋场，每到一处却遭当地居民抗争；时闻民众将大量垃圾倒在公所、机关单位门前表达抗议。在国外也常有类似新闻，如今几年意大利一个城市垃圾山饱和，政府下令封山，另择一处开设垃圾掩埋场，却遭受预定地附近的村民抗争阻挠而延宕。。。大家都不愿自家附近有垃圾山，其实垃圾是人们自己制造，倘若人人都能负起责任，怎会有垃圾问题产生？]

but then disbanding once these issues were resolved.¹²⁸ In contrast, *da ai* calls for love for everyone; in regards to the environment, this means building a cleaner, safer, and more beautiful home for all. This does not mean one's local environment should be ignored—on the contrary, community point recycling is the core of Tzu Chi's recycling infrastructure—but that this should be viewed simply as a starting point. Or, as Cheng Yen says, “Everyone should start with themselves. Implement community environmental protection and care for your community's environment; then, go out, popularize it, and influence the world.”¹²⁹

The universal nature of Tzu Chi's belief in environmentalism-as-love is also reflected in the much greater emphasis it gives the overarching, global issue of climate change over more specific regional or local issues. A recent analysis of Tzu Chi literature by Chengpang Lee and Ling Han found that while Tzu-Chi's environmentalism initially centered around a general discourse of locally focused environmental protection, it has changed into one focused on global climate change. So, while an early Tzu Chi environmental campaign called for the removal of heavy industry from Hualien, later writings have focused primarily on the need to mitigate the shared climate crisis.¹³⁰ Actually, the term “climate change” appeared in Tzu Chi publications as early as 1992, but it did not develop fully as an idea until after 2000. According to Lee and Han, the timing here is significant. Seven out of ten of Taiwan's worst typhoons have occurred after 2000; this, they argue, helped to prompt reflection on a possible link between anthropogenic climate change and natural disasters.¹³¹ However, Hurricane Katrina (2005) was also important for triggering a sense of “global climate connection.”¹³² In the years following Katrina, Tzu Chi literature revealed a rise in new efforts to link its already-established environmental protection practices with climate change.¹³³ Today, this discourse dominates Tzu Chi's environmentalism; although it focuses on the everyday actions of recycling and reducing consumption, the overall motivation to undertake these things is the way they can counteract global warming and

¹²⁸ Mary Alice Haddad, “Paradoxes of Democratization,” in *Routledge Handbook of Environment and Society in Asia*, ed. Paul G. Harris and Graeme Lang (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 90, <https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315774862.ch6>.

¹²⁹ Cheng Yen, *Purity*, 17. [大家应从自己做起, 落实社区环保, 关怀社区环境, 进而推展出去, 影响世界潮流]

¹³⁰ Lee and Han, “Recycling,” 318.

¹³¹ Lee and Han, “Recycling,” 318.

¹³² Lee and Han, “Recycling,” 317.

¹³³ Lee and Han, “Recycling,” 323.

subsequent natural disasters. A key motivator is the linkage of these disasters with suffering. Wildfires in the American Southwest, for instance, are described as “threatening human lives and destroying communities,” and causing “heart wrenching devastation” through the deaths of firefighters.¹³⁴ This universal framing, as well as the focus on not just traditional Buddhist compassion but on modern, ecumenical *love*, reflects the influence of modern trends in Chinese philanthropy upon Tzu Chi’s environmental discourse.

Tzu Chi’s singular focus on service reflects its humanistic roots; like Taixu and Yinshun (and her contemporaries), Cheng Yen believes Buddhists must undertake compassionate, bodhisattva-like action to build a Pure Land on Earth. Cheng Yen expands upon the work of Taixu and Yinshun, however, by imagining environmentalism as yet another legitimate sphere of engaged Buddhist action for her bodhisattva-volunteers. Examination of Tzu Chi environmental literature reveals a systematic and well-developed eco-theology in which environmental crisis becomes an ethical issue that demands action. Desire, long maligned in traditional Buddhist thought, is now explicitly connected to the global environmental crisis—a crisis that is in turn connected to the harm of not only natural but also human life. Calls to mitigate ecological destruction are bolstered by Tzu Chi’s presentation of environmentalism as a kind of universal love, one that renders even the smallest acts of environmental engagement profound expressions of bodhisattva action. In the following section, I will explore how this eco-theology is put into practice and made meaningful for environmental volunteers.

¹³⁴ Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation, “Words to Volunteers: What is Happening to Our World,” September 8, 2014, http://tw.tzuchi.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1135%3Awords-to-volunteers-&catid=122%3Amorning-volunteer-assembly-&Itemid=327&lang=en.

Chapter Four: To be an Environmental Bodhisattva

Tzu Chi's eco-theology imagines the individual mind as both the cause and the cure of environmental crisis; in recognition of the power and responsibility this places upon the individual, it also prescribes a system of environmental behaviors, cast as practices of cultivation, for the individual to follow. By doing so, one can lessen their desires and strengthen their awareness of the individual's responsibility for loving our shared earth and transforming it into a pure land. Ultimately, Tzu Chi has articulated a very particular moral discourse surrounding individual environmental behavior. When I began interviewing volunteers about how they put these ideas into practice in their daily lives, they repeatedly affirmed Cheng Yen's belief that small acts of everyday behavior can be radically transformative. When volunteers were asked about what they, as individuals, do to love the earth (*ai diqiu* 爱地球), most spoke first of recycling. If asked what they do beyond that, answers usually included keeping a vegetarian diet, shopping less, and monitoring other consumption-related behaviors. However, I soon noticed that volunteers were not only concerned with their own, individual behaviors. Instead, most indicated a pressing sense of responsibility for changing the eco-behavior of others. As Tzu Chi believes the mind is the key to a more sustainable future, than changing the minds of others—and of as many as you can—becomes the volunteer's activist imperative. The following section will examine how volunteers conceive of this responsibility and how it informs how they see themselves and their role in bringing about a more sustainable future. Material for this section comes primarily from interviews with volunteers.

Environmentalism as a Social Mission

First, it must be noted that Tzu Chi volunteers generally imagine broader society as beset by spiritual crisis: humanity is portrayed as ignorant, avaricious, and selfish. In fact, volunteers often differentiated themselves from other Buddhists by focusing on this point. When asked about her family's religious belief, Sister Wang said:

When I was a child my mother had superstition. She believed in what was useful for her. When she was sick, she would believe in something; but if she thought it wasn't doing her any good, she would believe in something else. This is an advantageous kind of

belief. But we believe in what benefits others; this is our Tzu Chi belief. It's not the same. When I believe in Buddha, I don't ask of him. A bodhisattva should ask, what can I do?¹³⁵

Sister Wang distinguished selfless *giving* from selfish *taking*. Most volunteers find this kind of self-interest to be endemic not just to Buddhist circles, but to all of society, and cited a wide variety of things as proof of this: elderly people in nursing homes, alcoholism, divorce. But just as frequently, they mentioned how self-interest keeps humanity from moderating its behavior for the health of the planet. Sister Li summed up the situation thusly:

Natural disasters are all man-made disasters. Natural disasters are all created by man! Our master is very wise, she knows that natural disasters and people's inner hearts are connected. People's hearts are restless, they're too dirty, they need regulation. Many people, they just buy, buy, buy. You must think, is this something I want or something I need? But many people don't understand.¹³⁶

Even though Tzu Chi teaches a rather optimistic message—everyone can change—volunteers often seemed resigned to the fact that change would be slow in coming. To set up a recycling point, volunteers must convince the Hangzhou office that they have the time and space to establish a sustainable project; after gaining approval, they must get permission from the property manager of their residential community (*shequ* 社区). If this is successfully granted, the project can begin. But engaging one's fellow residents can be a challenge, and the recycling points I visited had varying levels of success in maintaining engagement, which in turn challenged volunteers' optimism. In addition to calling out selfishness, volunteers variously highlighted the laziness, apathy, and ignorance of society. One volunteer asked me about the recycling situation in the United States; was it true, Sister Chen asked, that many people there were also quite apathetic about recycling? When I agreed that that was probably a fair assessment, she sighed. Western countries, she argued, have had a much longer history of educating their people about environmentalism. If their people still don't recycle, what does that

¹³⁵ “我小时候，我妈妈有迷信，她就信她有用的东西。她生病的时候信这个，她觉得这个对我不好所以我信那个，就是一个有利的信。我们的信为有利他，这是我们慈济的信，那其实是不一样的，我信佛不如是说，不是去求他得所，一个菩萨要问我我可以做什么”

¹³⁶ 天灾都是人祸，天灾都是人造的！我们师傅很有智慧，她知道天灾与人内心有关。人的心不安，是太脏了，需要规范。很多人，他们就买买买。你要想想这是我想要的还是我需要的。但很多人不懂。

say about how difficult it is to overcome fixed ways of thinking? News like this made her quite hopeless, she confessed. That said, all volunteers made sure to stress that they do think change will eventually happen. Despite their frustrations, they share a belief in Tzu Chi's ability to counteract these tendencies through the power of education and lived examples.

Volunteers' commitment to education is made most obvious at the Environmental Education Bases. Hangzhou has two; a larger base that opened in 2015, and a smaller, newer one.

Technically, the bases are meant to educate anyone, but the larger EEB is primarily visited by school groups (visits are coordinated with help from the local education bureau). Consequently, volunteer reflections focused quite a bit on the need to educate children in particular. I received a tour of the base from two volunteers, both of whom spoke very positively about recent efforts by public schools to bring environmental protection into the classroom. That said, both saw these efforts as incomplete. Brother Guo expressed to me that, in fact, most of the children who come to the base are very aware of the need to “do environmental protection” (*zuo huanbao* 做环保). The problem, he said, is that “they don't know *how* to do it.”¹³⁷ Tzu Chi prides itself on teaching children actionable ways to protect the environment (such as not leaving household lights on) and providing them with simple ways to think about environmental protection, such as using one's fingers to count off the ten kinds of recyclable materials. But, volunteers also suggested that schools do not emphasize the urgency of environmental issues enough. When asked how the children generally respond, both volunteers said that spending time at the base makes a deep impression on them, and that it teaches them to understand the urgency of changing one's behavior in a way that schools do not. Thus, although they assessed students' environmental awareness (*huanbao yishi* 环保意识) as “very low,” they remained optimistic that they were making an impact as educators. Another volunteer stressed the importance of instructing children in good habits as early as possible. A kindergarten teacher, Sister Zhang has her students collect their milk cartons every day so that they can be recycled at the Tzu Chi base: “Every day I tell them: love the earth, love this beautiful world!”¹³⁸

¹³⁷问题就是，他们不知道怎么做。

¹³⁸ 我每天告诉他们，爱地球，爱这个美丽的世界！

Tzu Chi volunteers also aim to serve as models for others around them. Volunteers often tell stories of how family, friends, and coworkers noticed their behavior and became interested in Tzu Chi because of it. Sister Sun recounted the following:

Recycling can cultivate your inner heart. It will give you a compassionate heart, and a grateful heart. You will realize, how blessed I am! Your relationships with others will change; for example, my mother and I have always had communication problems. After I joined Tzu Chi, she was frustrated, because I didn't have time to spend with her. But later she realized the change in me, and she started to come to Tzu Chi activities. And now? Now she even goes and does recycling every week!¹³⁹

Because of this, her strategy to get more people interested in Tzu Chi is to simply do more. Sister Sun believes that if she invests more in Tzu Chi, she will become an even better person. In turn, she will influence more people, including their environmental behaviors. Sister Li referred to this as “planting seeds in the hearts of others.” She said:

Recycling gives me a very sweet feeling. Before, I had a lot of frustration, and my temper was very bad. But now I'm very happy every day! I'm always happy when I do environmental protection. When people see how happy I am, and see my gentle spirit, they want to participate, this is spreading [the message]. We Tzu Chi people, we plant seeds in people's hearts. I don't care if you accept or not, I'm not a missionary, I just spread [the message].¹⁴⁰

Most volunteers joined Tzu Chi through their personal networks. There was a pair of cousins, a husband and wife, and more than a few work colleagues in my local Tzu Chi hub. Newer recruits would often speak of the influence that their “recruiters” had upon them, and these “recruiters” would in turn appear quite proud of this. Sister Yang told me about living in the same *shequ* as her cousin, Sister Li. They would often go shopping together, but upon coming home, Sister Yang would refuse to take the elevator up to her room. Sister Li found this incredibly strange at the time, but now both cousins agree that Sister Yang's refusals were a valuable opportunity to

¹³⁹ 垃圾分类可以修你的内心，会给你一个慈悲心，一个感恩心，你会体悟我这么幸福！你跟别人的关系会改变，比方说，我和我妈一直有沟通问题，加入慈济后，我妈有烦恼，我没有时间配合她，但后来她注意到我的变化，她开始参加慈济活动。现在呢？现在她每个星期都去做垃圾分类！

¹⁴⁰ 垃圾分类给我一个很甜的感觉。我以前有很多烦恼，我脾气不好。但现在我每天很开心！我做环保的时总是很开心。当人看到我这么开心，看到我柔和心灵，他们想参加，那是传播。我们慈济人，我们在人心下种子。我不管你接不接受，我不是一个传教者。我就传播。

open up a conversation about environmental behaviors. It was these conversations, both cousins agree, that got Sister Li interested in recycling for the first time. Anecdotes such as this one are often circulated among volunteers; they provide “proof” that volunteers can educate others simply by living an eco-conscious life.

As mentioned, women make up the majority of Tzu Chi, and they made up the majority of my informants. They in particular stressed their responsibility for instilling good environmental values in their children and modeling good eco-behavior to them. Sister Liu said about her school-age children:

Environmental protection is a part of my life. For instance, we have sorted our garbage at home for many years now. My children are the same, they’ve been influenced by me. When they buy something they will say, “I don’t need a bag, I will carry it home in my hands!”¹⁴¹

Sister Liu conveyed a strong sense of pride here, a sense of pride that was quite common when volunteers spoke about their children’s behavior. Sister Sun said about her adult daughter, an environmental engineer:

Of course she’s been influenced by me. She became a vegetarian when she was fifteen. I eat vegan, but she still eats a little milk, a little yogurt. But this still makes me very happy. Later—later she studied environmental science; I’m really very happy.¹⁴²

Praising other’s children was even a way to compliment fellow volunteers. I once heard one volunteer praise another because her daughter would cry if she couldn’t come and do recycling. Yet another agreed: “She’s really a little bodhisattva!”¹⁴³ Tzu Chi speaks quite positively of the traditional family unit, and in addition to filial piety, it emphasizes parents’ (and in particular mothers’) responsibility for instilling proper values in their children. As part of this, many of the women I spoke with highlighted the need to teach good eco-behavior.

¹⁴¹ 环保是我的生活一部分，比方说，我家里也垃圾分类了很多年了，我孩子也一样，他们也收到了我的影响，买东西的话会说不用袋子，我手拿回家！

¹⁴² 她当然收到我的影响。她十五岁开始吃素。我自己吃全素，但她还吃一点牛奶，一点酸奶，但这还让我特别开心。然后，然后她学了环境科学；我真的很开心。

¹⁴³ 她真是个小菩萨！

Environmentalism and Volunteer Identity

Ultimately, volunteers see mainstream society as spiritually ill. In reflection of this, they express a commitment to disseminating Tzu Chi's eco-theology among their family, friends, and broader society. Furthermore, this clear sense of a social mission directly influences how volunteers imagine themselves and their role in bringing about spiritual and thus environmental transformation. Essentially, they see themselves as educators and role models for a world that is spiritually adrift. However, when talking about their experiences, Tzu Chi volunteers frame this activist commitment in humanistic Buddhist terms. Volunteers readily adopt the identity of "real-world bodhisattvas" (*renjian pusa* 人间菩萨) as well as the identity of "environmental bodhisattvas" (*huanbao pusa* 环保菩萨) accordingly—titles first used by Cheng Yen to praise and encourage volunteers.¹⁴⁴ In doing so, they draw upon the humanistic conception of the bodhisattva, one which reworks the traditional concept to align with a more engaged form of Buddhism. Cheng Yen often refers to volunteers as bodhisattvas, and in doing so implies that this is a realizable identity, fully attainable in the here-and-now. If one decides to dedicate their life to the service of others, and then makes a demonstrated attempt to back this up with action, then one has become a real-world bodhisattva. For volunteers, however, the ideal of the real-world bodhisattva functions more as an *aspirational* identity.

For instance, Sister Sun had identified as a Buddhist for around ten years before joining Tzu Chi. When asked if her faith had changed in any way since then, she replied:

My faith...hasn't changed, but the direction is different. Our Master says, we must have hearts free of desire. We must give. Many people's goal in studying Buddhism is to become a buddha, but I want to be a real-world bodhisattva.¹⁴⁵

Sister Sun's goal is to live upon the earth as a bodhisattva would, which is to say, in a way that will bring benefit to others. Unlike the identity of a "Tzu Chi person" (*ciji ren* 慈济人), which volunteers used for themselves frequently and without hesitation, Tzu Chi volunteers rarely

¹⁴⁴ Lu, "The Creation," 4.

¹⁴⁵ 我的信。。。没有改变，但方向不同。上人说，我们要有无求的心。我们要付出。很多人学佛的目标都在成佛，但我想当人间菩萨。

described themselves as “real-life bodhisattvas” directly. Nonetheless it was clear they identified with the concept as something that they, like Sister Sun, could aspire to be someday. Thus, reference to a “path” towards bodhisattva-hood was also common. As Sister Zhou said, “I want to give my money, give my time, to others. I want to walk the real-life bodhisattva path.”¹⁴⁶ Writing about the complexities of religious identity, Erin Johnston argues that greater attention be paid to how religious communities help individuals “acquire a sense of who they are (in the present), but also...of who they want to become (in the future).”¹⁴⁷ Religious communities often uphold models of ideal spiritual selves; these ideal selves model “the way of being that practitioners are (or ought to be) striving to embody.”¹⁴⁸ These desired, future selves, Johnston argues, function “as an important means through which religious communities shape individual experience and action.”¹⁴⁹ For Tzu Chi volunteers, spiritual development—or in other words, progression along the bodhisattva path—is understood as an ongoing process in which being a real-world bodhisattva is a powerful, but ultimately aspirational, ideal.

Volunteers invoke the term “environmental bodhisattva” when talking specifically about their environmental protection efforts, particularly those that relate to bringing about social change. (Interestingly, although Tzu Chi does much more than environmental work, I never heard anyone talk about being an “education bodhisattva,” or a “medical bodhisattva.” This specialized title seemed to be used only to describe environmental work. As a newer area of work, this perhaps speaks to a deliberate attempt by Cheng Yen to elevate environmental service within the organization). For example, Brother He said about his responsibility for encouraging his *shequ* to recycle: “Our Master encourages us to be environmental bodhisattvas; to make the earth healthy, and at peace.”¹⁵⁰ (Brother He’s comment also reveals another aspect of being a “Tzu Chi person”: its volunteers are fervently devoted to Cheng Yen, and calls like these are therefore taken very seriously). Again, though, environmentalism is seen as part of a path; being an environmental bodhisattva is something to work towards. This perhaps explains why volunteers,

¹⁴⁶ 我要花我自己的钱, 我自己的时间给别人, 我要行人间菩萨道。

¹⁴⁷ Erin Johnston, “The Enlightened Self: Identity and Aspiration in Two Communities of Practice,” in “Religion and the Individual: Belief, Practice, and Identity,” ed. Douglas J. Davies and Michael J. Thate, special issue, *Religions* 7, no. 7 (2016): 62-76, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel7070092>.

¹⁴⁸ Johnston, “The Enlightened Self,” 62.

¹⁴⁹ Johnston, “The Enlightened Self,” 63.

¹⁵⁰ 上人让我们发心做环保菩萨, 让大地健康、平安。

usually quick to criticize the eco-behavior of mainstream society, appear to tolerate their own environmental “failings” so well. For example, after explaining in detail the importance of a vegetarian diet to me, new-recruit Sister Zhou readily admitted that she herself is not fully vegetarian. However, she was extremely cavalier about this admission; instead of justifying or making excuses for her behavior, Sister Zhou instead stressed the steps she *had* made to transition, gradually, to the diet. Because being an environmental bodhisattva, like being a real-world bodhisattva generally, is an aspirational ideal, shortcomings are seen as inevitable and merely motivation to do better going forward.

However, while the idea of the bodhisattva is used as an ideal to model one’s self upon, it also serves a communal function, in that it is used as a term of praise or endearment to signal appreciation and encouragement to one’s fellow volunteers. First, it serves as a way for volunteers to convey their appreciation for each other. Gratitude is a core value within the organization, and members are deliberate about conveying their thanks for other members of the Tzu Chi “family.” To volunteers, each individual act of carpooling or recycling is an act in service of building a better world for all, particularly because it models, publicly, more eco-friendly ways of living. Thus, one should appreciate other’s efforts in this regard. For example, if a volunteer cooked a vegetarian dish for an event, it was not unusual to hear a “thank you, environmental bodhisattva!” (*ganen huanbao pusa* 感恩环保菩萨) afterwards. Receiving these expressions of gratitude allows volunteers to feel recognized for their work, and giving them allows them to signal appreciation for others in turn. Furthermore, the bodhisattva ideal is used by volunteers to encourage each other. A WeChat post of a volunteer cleaning up at the EEB, for example, would frequently garner a “good work, bodhisattva!” (*jiayou pusa* 加油菩萨) from others. As discussed above, volunteers sometimes struggle with feeling that their work was slow going and even ineffective. As volunteers strive to become environmental bodhisattvas, these types of affirmations—that one in fact *is* an environmental bodhisattva, and that they *are* making a difference—are a key means of maintaining morale within the group. This harkens back to how Cheng Yen tends to use the phrase—supportive and encouraging, it suggests volunteers are not future bodhisattvas but bodhisattvas in the here-and-now. While it may seem contradictory, these differing usages highlight how the ideal of the real-world, environmental bodhisattva shapes both volunteer perceptions of their day-to-day work as well as the aspirations that drive them forward.

Ultimately, while Tzu Chi members strive to live environmentally friendly lifestyles themselves, they are also acutely concerned with the eco-behavior of others. Much of how they see themselves and their work centers on understanding themselves as educators and models. Although many volunteers wrestle with doubt about the impact of their work, they remain committed to spreading Tzu Chi's eco-theology to engender lasting, society-wide change. Nonetheless, volunteers do not conceive of themselves as "activists," but as "bodhisattvas." Although volunteers see themselves as fallible, and up against a world that is spiritually bereft, they encourage each other and themselves by adopting the identity of real-world, environmental bodhisattvas. As environmental bodhisattvas, Tzu Chi volunteers strive to change not only their own eco-behavior, but also that of others.

Conclusion

Our current world is faced with a seemingly ever-increasing number of environmental issues: climate change, resource scarcity, and the pollution of air, soil, and water are just a few of the issues that threaten the ecological health of the global environment. In fact, a growing number of community activists, journalists, and academics are now going as far as to label the current state of affairs a *crisis*. And indeed, the consequences of environmental degradation extend well beyond the natural: ecological exploitation has spawned social unrest, public health and safety concerns, and widescale economic losses. The question of how to ensure that human development continues along a more sustainable path is, therefore, a pressing one.

Both China and Taiwan have struggled to mitigate the effects of decades of rapid development and industrialization. While China has experienced dazzling economic growth over the past few decades, its natural environment has suffered tremendously. Although exploitation of the natural environment for political, territorial, or economic gain was certainly not without precedent, the Reform era presented China with unrivaled challenges as Deng Xiaoping argued for development first and the environment second.¹⁵¹ Today China struggles with high rates of pollution, acid rain, desertification, deforestation, and grassland degradation.¹⁵² The social and economic consequences of such destruction is troubling, too: pollution-related illnesses, for example, are now a grave public health issue.¹⁵³ Taiwan, one of the so-called “Four Asian Tigers,” has also suffered the consequences of its rapid industrialization in the postwar period. Although environmental ENGOs did begin to crop up after the lifting of martial law and democratization, their work remains far from finished. High levels of waste production, a shrinking forest cover, and industrial pollution from the petrochemical and steel industries all threaten the island’s ecological health.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ Elizabeth C. Economy, *The River Runs Black: The Environmental Challenge to China’s Future* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 17-18.

¹⁵² Economy, *The River*, 18.

¹⁵³ Economy, *The River*, 19.

¹⁵⁴ Simona Grano, “Environmental Issues Facing Taiwan,” *Brookings*, November 9, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/environmental-issues-facing-taiwan/>.

Neither Taixu nor Yinshun addressed environmental issues in their work. Their concern for building a better world manifested itself primarily in administering aid for the poor, the sick, and the orphaned and widowed. Their spiritual heirs, however—Cheng Yen most prominently among them—have brought environmentalism well within the fold of humanistic Buddhist action. In doing so, Taiwan’s humanistic Buddhists are responding to what has, over time, become an issue of increasing urgency. By developing a robust and comprehensive eco-theology, Cheng Yen has woven concern for the environment into the larger humanistic framework that animates Tzu Chi’s work. The humanistic mission to serve as a real-world bodhisattva is expanded to imagine environmental activism and an eco-friendly lifestyle as legitimate forms of such service.

Recent scholarly interest in the intersection between religion and ecology, and in particular, between Asian religions and ecology, posits that Eastern traditions have unique contributions to offer the global community in its attempts to bring about a more sustainable future. While this claim may still be premature, it is evident that Taiwan’s humanistic movements do see themselves as having something compelling to offer in this regard. By encouraging individuals to think more holistically about how their individual behaviors impact the natural environment, Tzu Chi in particular hopes to bring about widespread environmental change. The question of how successful Tzu Chi will be in realizing this aim is a complex one and certainly beyond the scope of this thesis to answer. However, a useful starting point is to consider how volunteers themselves come to find meaning in environmentalism. Fieldwork reveals that Tzu Chi’s Hangzhou volunteers prioritize environmentalism to a great degree. Most carry out regular shifts at Tzu Chi’s environmental education bases and make serious attempts to limit their consumption of meat and unnecessary goods. However, much of the value they derive in being environmental bodhisattvas in fact comes from imagining themselves as social reformers. Like the bodhisattvas of traditional Buddhist cosmology—Guanyin and the like—volunteers see themselves as called to save humankind. For environmental bodhisattvas, however, this includes educating others on how to free themselves from desire and live in greater harmony with the earth.

In the PRC, Tzu Chi’s presence remains relatively small. That said, it has undergone consistent growth over the past few decades; when coupled with the positive reputation it enjoys among

mainland Buddhist communities and the support it has been granted by the Chinese leadership, volunteers are perhaps not wrong to imagine themselves as a potentially influential voice as China begins to engage more actively with its environmental issues. Moreover, given that the state has now signaled its support for this kind of social service work by religious groups, Tzu Chi may gain even more opportunities to spread its environmental message going forward. While much of this remains uncertain, one thing is not—for Tzu Chi's environmental bodhisattvas, there is a need, and a responsibility, to try.

Bibliography

- Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation 佛教慈济慈善事业基金会. “Ciji nianjian”慈济年鉴 [Tzu-Chi Almanac 2018]. Accessed December 6, 2019.
<http://tw.tzuchi.org/ebook/almanac/2018almanac/>.
- Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation. “Biography of Dharma Master Cheng Yen.” May 22, 2014.
http://tw.tzuchi.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=159&Itemid=198&lang=en.
- . “A Life of Quality and Value.” April 25, 2008.
http://www.tzuchi.org.tw/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=346:a-life-of-quality-andvalue&catid=104:great-love-after-asia-tsunami&Itemid=277.
- . “Seize Every Second.” May 11, 2009.
http://tw.tzuchi.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=182%3Aseize-every-second&catid=82%3Amiscellaneous&Itemid=326&lang=en.
- . “Tzu Chi Global Branch Offices.” May 21, 2012.
http://tw.tzuchi.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=974%3Atzu-chi-global-offices&Itemid=284&lang=en.
- . “Tzu Chi Opens Chinas 1st Overseas NGO Office.” August 23, 2010.
http://tw.tzuchi.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=647%3Atzu-chi-opens-chinas-dirst-overseas-ngo-office&lang=en.
- . “Words to Volunteers: What is Happening to our World.” September 8, 2014.
http://tw.tzuchi.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1135%3Aword-s-to-volunteers-&catid=122%3Amorning-volunteer-assembly-&Itemid=327&lang=en.
- The Central People’s Government of the People’s Republic of China 中华人民共和国中央人民政府. “Guanyu guli he guifan zongjiaojie congshi gongyi cishan huodong de yijian” 关于鼓励和规范宗教界从事公益慈善活动的意见 [Opinions on Encouraging and Standardizing the Public Philanthropic Activities of Religious Groups]. February 27, 2012. http://www.gov.cn/zwggk/2012-02/27/content_2077338.htm.
- Chen, Li 陈丽, and Zhou Chunyi 周纯义. “Taiwan fojiao cishan ciji jijinhui de huanbao shijian ji qishi” 台湾佛教慈善慈济基金会的环保实践及启示 [The Practice of and Lessons from

- the Environmental work of Taiwan's Tzu Chi Foundation]. *Shehui shichuang* 社会视窗 6, no. 351 (2010): 219-20.
- Cheng, Yen 释证严. *Qingjing zai yuantou* 清净在源头 [Purity Begins at the Source]. Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 2013.
- Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation 慈济慈善事业基金会. "Ciji cishan shiye jijinhui zhan lve fazhan zongti baogao" 慈济慈善事业基金会战略发展总体报告 [Tzu Chi Foundation's Comprehensive Report on Strategic Development]. Accessed December 5, 2019. <http://www.tzuchi.org.cn/doc/10-1.pdf>.
- . "Huanbao tuiguang xiangmu baogao shu" 环保推广项目报告书 [Report on the Environmental Protection Promotion Program]. Accessed January 11, 2019. <http://www.tzuchi.org.cn/doc/8-3.pdf>.
- . "Lianluo fangshi" 联络方式 [Contact Us]. December 3, 2018. <http://www.tzuchi.org.cn/联系我们/各地联系方式>.
- Creswell, John W. *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2007.
- Du, Lijie 杜立婕, and Xiao Yan 肖燕. "Zongjiao cishan gongyi zuzhi zhong de 'gongtongti': jiyu Ciji jijinhui Shanghai C fenhui de renleixue yanjiu" 宗教慈善公益组织中的 '共同体': 基于慈济基金会上海 C 分会的人类学研究 ['Community' in Religious Charitable Organizations: Anthropological Research Based on the Shanghai C Branch of the Tzu Chi Foundation]. *Zongjiao shehuixue* 宗教社会学 5 (2018): 149-171.
- Duara, Prasenjit. *The Crisis of Global Modernity: Asian Traditions and a Sustainable Future*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- Economy, Elizabeth C. *The River Runs Black: The Environmental Challenge to China's Future*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004.
- Ehrhardt-Martinez, Karen, Thomas K. Rudel, Kari Marie Norgaard, and Jeffrey Broadbent. "Consumption and Climate Change." In *Climate Change and Society: Sociological Perspectives*, edited by Riley E. Dunlap and Robert J. Brulle, 93-127. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Foreign Languages Department, Tzu Chi Culture and Communication Foundation. "Tzu Chi Q&A: A Glimpse into the Missions and Spirit of Tzu Chi." August 2017.

- [http://www.tzuchi.or.id/inliners/201711/Tzu%20Chi%20Q&A_First%20Edition%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.tzuchi.or.id/inliners/201711/Tzu%20Chi%20Q&A_First%20Edition%20(1).pdf).
- Gernet, Jacques. *Buddhism in Chinese Society: An Economic History from the Fifth to the Tenth Centuries*. Translated by Franciscus Verellen. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.
- Grano, Simona. "Environmental Issues Facing Taiwan." *Brookings*, November 9, 2015. <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/environmental-issues-facing-taiwan/>.
- Guest, Greg, Emily E. Namey, and Marilyn L. Mitchell. *Collecting Qualitative Data: A Field Manual for Applied Research*. Los Angeles: SAGE, 2013. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781506374680>.
- Haddad, Mary Alice. "Paradoxes of Democratization." In *Routledge Handbook of Environment and Society in Asia*, edited by Paul G. Harris and Graeme Lang, 86-104. Abingdon: Routledge, 2014. <https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315774862.ch6>.
- Harvey, Graham. "Field Research: Participant Observation." In *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, edited by Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler, 217-44. London: Routledge, 2011.
- Heller, Natasha. "Bodhisattva Cults in Chinese Buddhism." In *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to East and Inner Asian Buddhism*, edited by Mario Poceski, 221-238. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2014.
- Ho, Wan-Li. *Ecofamilism: Women, Religion, and Environmental Protection in Taiwan*. St. Petersburg, FL: Three Pines Press, 2016.
- Huang, Julia C. *Charisma and Compassion: Cheng Yen and the Buddhist Tzu Chi Movement*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009.
- Huang, Weishan. "The Place of Socially Engaged Buddhism in China: Emerging Religious Identity in the Local Community of Urban Shanghai." *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 25 (2018): 531-68. <http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/>.
- . "The Discourse and Practice of a Buddhist Cosmopolitanism: Transnational Migrants and Tzu Chi Movement." In *Cosmopolitanism, Religion and the Public Sphere*, edited by Maria Rovisco and Sebastian Kim, 15-31. New York: Routledge, 2014.

- Johnston, Erin. “The Enlightened Self: Identity and Aspiration in Two Communities of Practice.” In “Religion and the Individual: Belief, Practice, and Identity,” edited by Douglas J. Davies and Michael J. Thate. Special issue, *Religions* 7, no. 7 (2016): 62-76. <https://doi.org/10.3390/re17070092>.
- King, Sallie B. *The Ethics of Engaged Buddhism in Asia*, edited by Daniel Cozort and James Mark Shields, 479-500. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198746140.013.20>.
- Klein, Jakob A. “Buddhist Vegetarian Restaurants and the Changing Meanings of Meat in Urban China.” *Ethnos* 82, no. 2 (March 2017): 252–76. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2015.1084016>.
- Laliberté, André. “The Growth of a Taiwanese Buddhist Association in China: Soft Power and Institutional Learning.” *China Information* 27, no. 1 (2012): 81-105. <https://doi.org/DOI:10.1177/0920203X12466206>.
- Laliberté, André, David A. Palmer, and Keping Wu. “Religious Philanthropy and Chinese Civil Society.” In *Chinese Religious Life*, edited by David A. Palmer, Glenn Shive, and Philip L. Wickeri, 139–50. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199731398.003.0009>.
- Li, Ming 李明. “Taixu dashi yu fojiao cishan” 太虚大师与佛教慈善 [Master Taixu and Buddhist Charity]. *Huanggang zhiye jishu xueyuan xuebao* 黄冈职业技术学院学报 13, no. 5 (2011): 48–56. <https://doi.org/DOI:10.3969/j.issn.1672-1047.2011.05.13>.
- Lee, Chengpang, and Ling Han. “Recycling Bodhisattva: The Tzu-Chi Movement’s Response to Global Climate Change.” *Social Compass* 62, no. 3 (2015): 311–25. <https://doi.org/DOI:10.1177/0037768615587809>.
- Lu, Weixu 卢巍翎. “Zongjiao gongyi cishan shiye de jianli yu yunxing: Taiwan diqu Ciji laji fenlei huishou zhiye de chenggong jingyan yu qishi” 宗教公益慈善事业的建立与运行：台湾地区慈济垃圾分类回收志业的成功经验与启示 [The Creation and Operation of a Religious Philanthropic Enterprise: The Success of Tzu Chi’s Waste Sorting and Recycling Program in Taiwan and It’s Meaning for the Mainland]. *Huadong ligong daxue xuebao* 华东理工大学学报 2 (2017): 1–9.

- Main, Jessica L., and Rongdao Lai. "Introduction: Reformulating 'Socially Engaged Buddhism' as an Analytical Category." *The Eastern Buddhist* 44, no. 2 (2013): 1–34. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44362566>.
- McCarthy, Susan K. "Serving Society, Repurposing the State: Religious Charity and Resistance in China." *The China Journal* 70 (2013): 48–72. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/671330>.
- McGuire, Meredith B. *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- The National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China 中华人民共和国中央人民政府. "Zhonghua renmin gongheguo xianfa" 中华人民共和国宪法 [Constitution of the People's Republic of China]. December 4, 1982 (amended March 14, 2004). http://www.gov.cn/guoqing/2018-03/22/content_5276318.htm.
- Nicolaisen, Jeffrey. "The Intersection of Sentient Beings and Species, Tradition and Modern, in the Practices and Doctrine of Dharma Drum Mountain." In *Chinese Environmental Humanities: Practices of Environing at the Margins*, edited by Chia-Ju Chang, 289-308. Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2019. <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.uio.no/lib/oslo/detail.action?docID=5846563#>.
- Pittman, Don A. *Toward a Modern Chinese Buddhism: Taixu's Reforms*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001.
- Queen, Christopher S. "Socially Engaged Buddhism: Emerging Patterns of Theory and Practice." In *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy*, edited by Steven M. Emmanuel, 524–35. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2013. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118324004.ch34>.
- Reinke, Jens. "Innovation and Continuity in the Pure Lands: Pure Land Discourses and Practices at the Taiwanese Buddhist Order Dharma Drum Mountain." *Journal of Chinese Buddhist Studies* 30 (2017): 169-210. [http://chinesebuddhiststudies.org/previous_issues/jcbs3005_Reinke\(169-210\)_e.pdf](http://chinesebuddhiststudies.org/previous_issues/jcbs3005_Reinke(169-210)_e.pdf).
- Schak, David, and Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao. "Taiwan's Socially Engaged Buddhist Groups." *China Perspectives* 59 (2005): 1–18. <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/2803>.
- Silverman, David. *Doing Qualitative Research*. 4th ed. Los Angeles: SAGE, 2013.

- Svensson, Marina. "Ethical Dilemmas: Balancing Distance with Involvement." In *Doing Fieldwork in China*, edited by Maria Heimer and Stig Thøgersen, 262-82. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2006.
- Taylor, Bron. "The Greening of Religion Hypothesis (Part One): From Lynn White, Jr and Claims That Religions Can Promote Environmentally Destructive Attitudes and Behaviors to Assertions They Are Becoming Environmentally Friendly." *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 10, no.3 (2016): 268–305. doi: 10.1558/]smc.v10i3.29010.
- Tracy, Sarah J. *Qualitative Research Methods: Collecting Evidence, Crafting Analysis, Communicating Impact*. Chicester: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2013.
- Tzu Chi USA. "Becoming a Disciple." November 15, 2019. <https://tzuchi.us/blog/becoming-a-disciple>.
- Weller, Robert P. *Discovering Nature: Globalization and Environmental Culture in China and Taiwan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Weller, Robert P., C. Julia Huang, Keping Wu, and Lizhu Fan. *Religion and Charity: The Social Life of Goodness in Chinese Societies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.
- Zhe, Ji. "Zhao Puchu and His Renjian Buddhism." *The Eastern Buddhist* 44, no. 2 (2013): 35–58. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44362567>.