

Modernization and Traditionalism in Buddhist Almsgiving: The Case of the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu-chi Association in Taiwan

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Introduction

In 1966, a young, unknown nun living in the poorest part of Taiwan was considering relocating to the temple where her tonsure-master resided. A group of local women, who had grown fond of her, sent a delegation to convince her to stay. She listened to them, and agreed to stay on if the women would cooperate in a new kind of Buddhist discipline based on the daily practice of charitable giving and assistance to the poor. With their concurrence, the nun put a plan into operation that, in an astonishingly short time, led to the establishment and growth of one of the largest philanthropic organizations in the world: The Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu-Chi Association (*Fojiao Ciji gongde hui* 佛教慈濟功德會, hereafter “Ciji”).

The very success of this organization has inspired much scholarly reflection and analysis, and my own work in recording the history of Buddhism in Taiwan has put me into the company of researchers who have looked at its history and mission from many different angles. At this time, studies have appeared that analyze it from the point of view of history (Jones 1999; Jiang 1996), politics (Laliberté 1999, 2003; Madsen 2007), women’s studies (Weller and Huang 1998), modernity theory (ibid.), and other frames of reference. To add some new analyses to this mix, I will spend some time rehearsing the story of Ciji for readers not already familiar with it, and then analyze its rise and impact as a manifestation of the movement from “almsgiving” to “modern scientific charity.” After that, I will briefly consider the interesting relationship that Ciji members have with the organization and the process by which they construct new and distinctive Buddhist identities in an ambiguously modern key.

Ven. Zhengyan’s Life and the Founding of Ciji

Ven. Zhengyan 證嚴, the founder of the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu-Chi Association, was born under the name Wang Jinyun 王錦雲 in 1937 in the town of Qingshui 清水 in Taizhong County 台中縣. While she was still quite young, her family moved from Qingshui to Fengyuan 豐原, a somewhat larger town where her adoptive father ran a chain of movie theaters. As the oldest child, she had particular responsibilities to look after her younger siblings, especially since her mother suffered from ill health, and she also traveled with her father to help with the business side of his operations. She also experienced the hardships and fear of the Sino-Japanese war, which began the year of her birth, and the World War II Allied bombing campaigns against

Taiwan, which at the time was a part of Japan. During one of these air raids, as she crouched in a shelter with others, she heard people praying to the bodhisattva Guanyin 觀音 for deliverance.

An event that occurred in 1952 has become firmly enshrined as the first moment in the standard hagiography of Zhengyan. In this year, her mother became very ill with a perforated ulcer and the doctors advised surgery, a risky prospect under the barely-modernized medicine of the time. In a bid to save her mother, Jinyun kept a vigil and prayed to Guanyin repeatedly to restore her mother to health without the anxiety of a surgical procedure. She offered to exchange twelve years of her own lifespan and adopt a vegetarian diet in exchange. During this time, she had the same dream three nights in a row. She saw her mother lying on a pallet in front of a Buddha-image in a small temple with three doors. She herself knelt by a small fire near the pallet, and she was attempting unsuccessfully to compound medicine for her mother. After a time, a woman of august beauty floated into the room on a white cloud, and tipped a bundle of medicine into Jinyun's hand, who then gave it to her mother. After the third recurrence of this dream, her mother recovered completely, and Jinyun kept the vows that she had made.

The next significant moment came in 1960, when Jinyun was 23 years old. During this period she divided her time between helping around the family household and assisting her father with the theaters. In June, her father complained of a severe headache. She took him to a hospital where in the past he had been treated for high blood pressure, and there he received a shot to lower it a bit. Jinyun decided he could recover better in the quiet of his home, and so she arranged for a utility car to carry him on the bumpy ride back. He died the next day at the age of 51, and the doctor who came to the house said to Jinyun, "If only you had not moved him..." Jinyun, of course, felt responsible for his early death, and during his funeral, while the corpse was still in the household, she contemplated it and wondered repeatedly "Where is my father?" This question arose in her mind over and over again for many days, as if it were a Zen *koan*.

While grieving and pondering in this way, she began reading books on Buddhist doctrine and began attending repentance rituals at the Ciyun Temple 慈雲寺 in Fengyuan. She made the acquaintance of the resident nuns, but became particularly attached to a nun named Xiudao 修道, who had studied abroad in Japan. Contact with Xiudao and the other nuns led her to consider ordination for herself, and after consulting with Xiudao, she left suddenly for a temple in the Taipei suburbs. However, her mother located her and sent relatives to fetch her home.

Although she was back home, she continued to frequent the Ciyun Temple and think about ordination. While observing the monastic routines of the temple's resident clergy, she judged some aspects of their life to be inimical to her religious goals, in particular their reliance of funeral liturgies as a source of income and their dependence upon alms. She vowed that she would use neither for support if she were to be ordained. A second opportunity to leave the household came later in 1961, when, while harvesting rice with the nuns of the temple, Ven. Xiudao all of a sudden challenged her to leave together right then and there, not even stopping by home to say good-bye or change clothing. Jinyun accepted, and they went to the train station, and caught the first train out. They ended up in Taidong 台東, and settled in a Japanese-era shrine temple on a mountainside, practicing austerities together and living off gleanings from local farms. Two of Xiudao's disciples located them a while later and joined them there.

When the weather began to turn cold, the two disciples tried to persuade Jinyun and Xiudao to return to the Ciyun Temple, but they decided to go to the Qingjue Temple 清覺寺 in the town of Zhiben 知本 instead. The two disciples, disappointed, returned to Fengyuan and informed Jinyun's mother of her whereabouts. Her mother promptly arrived to get her home once again, but this time Jinyun refused and made her final break with the householder's life.

She and her master Xiudao came to the attention of local Buddhist devotees further up the east coast in the town of Hualian 花蓮, where she settled for good in 1962. She went to live near the Puming Temple 普明寺, claiming that it was the temple she had seen in her dreams when her mother was ill. A local Buddhist laywoman named Xu Congmin 許聰敏 took her in, and convinced some other local Buddhists to build a small wooden cabin behind the temple for Jinyun to live in and practice. Upon taking up residence in the cabin, the former Wang Jinyun shaved her own head, recited her own vows, and took the monastic name Ven. Xiucan 修參. During this period, she continued her practice of austerities and studied a handful of Mahayana Scriptures, notably the *Lotus Sutra*. Meanwhile, Xiudao developed some health problems and needed to return to the Ciyun Temple in Fengyuan. She asked Xiucan/Wang Jinyun to return with her, but the latter decided to remain in Hualian. The two parted ways, and Xiucan was left to chart her own course.

Buddhist monastic ordination takes place in two stages: novice and full ordination.¹ In 1963, Xiucan decided the time had come to obtain full ordination, and went to Taipei to participate in the ordination session organized and administered by the Buddhist Association of the Republic of China. However, when she arrived at the Linji Chan Temple and went to register, she found that her self-ordination was not valid and she was ineligible; without a "tonsure-master" (*tidushi* 剃度師) having given her the novice's ordination, she would have to return home and try again later. While in Taipei, she stayed as a guest in the Huiji Lecture Hall (*huiji jiangtang* 慧日講堂). Upon returning there, she found that Ven. Yinshun 印順, one of the most renowned (and sometimes controversial) Buddhist intellectuals in Taiwan was also in residence there. Despite the discouragement of the resident monks, she approached him to ask if he would give her official tonsure. To everyone's surprise, he assented, and gave her the new dharma-name under which she would be known thereafter: Zhengyan. She managed to get back to the ordination site during the last hour of registration, and was duly ordained a nun.

Zhengyan led a particularly austere life back in her cabin behind the Puming Temple. She ate one meal a day, worshipped the Buddha, burned incense scars on her arms, and copied the *Lotus Sutra* over by hand. Things were made more difficult for her because of her refusal to support herself in any traditional manner: she collected no alms, did not conduct funerals, organized no dharma-meetings (*fahui* 法會). Instead, she and a

¹ Under the Vinaya rules, female ordinands have an intermediate stage as well which functioned as a way of ensuring that they were not pregnant at the time of ordination. However, none of the sources of Zhengyan's biography mention her going through this stage, and so we must assume that, under the unusual circumstances of her ordination, she skipped it.

small but growing group of followers engaged in handicrafts for their support. Perhaps the one really traditional clerical activity in which she engaged during this period was lecturing, primarily on the *Lotus Sutra* and the *Earthstore Bodhisattva Sutra* (*Dizang jing* 地藏經) (DeVido2004, p. 92). During this time, local residents observed supernatural light emanating from her cabin. While some thought it a sign of her spiritual power, others thought it was weird or demonic, and members of the temple's governing committee fell into disagreement. When Zhengyan discovered this, she voluntarily moved out of the cabin and took a room with a family of lay followers surnamed Xu.

Two incidents in 1966 set in motion the chain of events that led to the present Ciji Association. First, one day, while waiting in a small, dingy clinic in Hualian, she noticed a puddle of blood on the floor. When she asked about it, she was informed that earlier in the day, some aboriginal tribesmen had arrived with a girl who had suffered a miscarriage and was bleeding badly. Despite their having brought her many miles to the clinic, the doctors had refused to see her because they had no money to put down as a deposit. The girl had died in the waiting room.² The second event followed on shortly. While at her home, a group of Catholic nuns came to see her on a mission trip. In their efforts to convert her, they pointed out that Buddhism had a very passive attitude toward suffering, while Christian groups in Taiwan ran hospitals and clinics to help the poor.

Zhengyan did not convert, of course, but the conjunction of these two events made her think deeply about ways in which Buddhists might address the suffering of the poor more effectively. She decided, first and foremost, that Buddhism needed to develop a response to suffering that was both rational and active. She agreed that Buddhism had theretofore taken a passive approach, teaching the inevitability of suffering and assisting people to accept it patiently. She decided to reform Buddhism, or, as she saw it, return it to its roots as an active agent assisting those in need. Her program would fulfill two goals: First, she would modernize Buddhism's approach to suffering. Specifically, she would find a way to make modern, scientific medical treatment available for the poor. Second, she decided that she needed to involve others in this effort in such a way that it would provide an opportunity for them to engage in spiritual practice while helping the poor. The idea for Ciji was born.

Zhengyan at first intended to move to the town of Jiayi 嘉義 to be close to her master Yinshun. When her followers in Hualian heard of her plan, they approached her and asked her to remain where she was. In consenting to stay, she set the condition that everyone in this group, about thirty housewives, would have to cooperate with her venture. Each of them was to set aside a small amount of their daily grocery money (equivalent to U.S. 0.2¢) in order to build a fund that would help poor people to defray the cost of medical care. This procedure would fulfill both of the objectives noted above. The fund would go to help the poor, and at the same time the daily practice of putting aside small amounts of money (as opposed to larger amounts at less frequent intervals) would provide a daily opportunity to practice the virtue of giving and thus provide a means of developing the participants' spirituality.

² This story is entrenched as a standard part of Ciji's history, but its veracity has been challenged. When the name of the doctor in charge of the clinic at that time was made public in 2001, his family sued Ciji for defamation. Ciji lost the suit, and Zhengyan declined to appeal the ruling and paid a large indemnity to the doctor's family. See Huang 2006, p. 17, 18.

The achievements of 1966 were modest. The women each put aside their pittance every day, spread the word to their friends and convinced others to participate, and the total budget for the group was equivalent at that time to US\$30.00 (Huang 2005, p. 185). From these beginnings, the organization quickly burgeoned and began to grow almost exponentially. In 1980, the group registered as a civic organization with the central government under the name Ciji Gongde Hui 慈濟功德會, which in its own English-language literature is translated as “Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu-Chi Association.” This is a corpus of volunteers centered around a core group of people called “commissioners” (*weiyuan* 委員) who oversee the ordinary volunteers. In addition, the financial corporation that administers Ciji’s funds is called the Ciji Foundation (*Fojiao ciji jijinhui* 佛教慈濟基金會), with a staff of over 500 people who oversee assets that, as of the year 2000, totaled US\$342 million. That same year, the Foundation gave away US \$157 million (Huang 2005, p. 186). The original group of thirty housewives has also expanded to an international organization which claims five million members, although many of these are one-time contributors only.

In addition to the collection and granting of financial resources, Ciji also has come to command a great amount of human resources in the form of volunteer time and effort. When Ciji opened in 1966, it took as its first case an elderly woman from mainland China who was unable to care for herself. In addition to assisting her financially with medical costs, volunteers also went to visit her, clean her house, and prepare food. The object was to give her total care and not just a one-time donation as if she were a beggar. (Jones 1999, p. 206) In dealing today with larger-scale projects, such as helping victims of the 1999 earthquake in Taiwan, flooding in mainland China, or earthquakes in Pakistan and Iran, Ciji has always made it a matter of policy to field its own volunteers rather than give money to another organization on the scene (such as the Red Cross). I am not aware of any source that provides statistics on the donation of manhours, but it must be as substantial as the monetary outlay.

As the organization has grown, so its mission has evolved. It began as a general mandate to raise money to help the poor obtain medical care and to provide volunteers to assist shut-ins, but it has since been elaborated as the “four missions”:

1. charity (on-site investigation, evaluation, and long-term care);
2. medical work (hospitals, clinics);
3. education (university, teacher’s association, youth camps); and
4. culture (publications and TV broadcasts).

These were labeled respectively *ci* 慈, *bei* 悲, *xi* 喜, and *she* 捨. Later, the two additional endeavors of international relief and running a bone-marrow bank were added to bring the list to six, and together these were interpreted as six aspects of a single mission with the phrase “One step, six footprints” (*yi bu liu jiaoyin* 一步六腳印). (Huang 1996, p. 128-129)

Still later, the list added another list called Ciji’s “four footprints” (*si jiaoyin* 四腳印):

1. international disaster relief;

2. bone-marrow bank;
3. environmentalism; and
4. community volunteerism. (Huang 2005, p. 188)

(I have noted that in other Ciji literature, these are all listed together as the “eight footprints”; see Laliberté, 1999, p. 110.) During a visit that I made to the Ciji headquarters in Hualian in November 2004, I saw that the mission now includes a concerted effort to elicit donations of cadavers for medical training, something that traditional Chinese funerary beliefs had previously impeded. Thus, it is clear that the mission and vision are continually evolving.

The “nuts and bolts” of Ciji’s growth, organization, relations with the government, and operations have been well studied and documented elsewhere (See especially Huang 2005; Huang and Weller 1998; Jones 1999; and Laliberté 1999). For the remainder of this article, I would like to focus on various factors, both Buddhist and secular, that provide the underpinning for all this charitable activity.

Elements of Ciji’s Success

Although Ciji is not a traditional Buddhist organization, it still articulates its ideals in terms of Buddhist beliefs and worldview, though with its own set of emphases. Zhengyan’s, and therefore Ciji’s, own specialty over the years has been focused on the provision of medical care, in particular of the most modern, technologically advanced (some might say “western”) medicine. Certainly Buddhism has thought about its teaching in terms of medicine before, and at various times in Buddhist history, Buddhist organizations and temples have provided medical care as a charitable work. Furthermore, all of the iconic moments in Zhengyan’s hagiography relate to medical crises and dilemmas: her mother’s illness, her father’s sudden death, the death of the aboriginal woman, and the visit of the Catholic nuns all impressed upon Zhengyan’s mind the importance of making medical care available, and of Buddhism’s shortcomings when compared to the Christian missionaries in this regard.

In addition, compassion (*cibei* 慈悲) has traditionally been regarded as a Buddhist virtue, and almsgiving as one of the Six Perfections. However, while traditional Buddhism has made compassion the equal of wisdom, and has either presented the Six Perfections as equal in value (or else elevated the Perfection of Wisdom to the head position), Zhengyan has made compassion the primary virtue and almsgiving the preeminent practice, and has reframed the other five perfections in relation to these. Doing humble volunteer work around the hospital leads to the perfection of forbearance. Doing volunteer work or setting money aside every day leads to the perfection of discipline. Attention to giving and volunteer work over a lifetime leads to the perfection of effort. Focusing one’s mind on the poor while serving them leads to the perfection of concentration. Reflecting on the donor’s, recipient’s, and the gift’s lack of self, and the perfect interfusion of the three in the midst of the act of giving, lead to the perfection of wisdom. (Jones 1999, p. 214-15)

Zhengyan’s own appeal to her followers is also based on factors that seem very traditional. Above all else, every scholar and journalist who has written on Ciji has noted the founder’s charisma as an essential element in her ability to attract and retain followers, and many have offered widely varying explanations of the source of this

charisma. The Taiwan scholar (and subsequent Ciji member) Lu Huixin 盧蕙馨 points to Zhengyan's ability to play the role of strict father and gentle mother simultaneously, something that appeals very powerfully within Chinese cultural values. (Lu 1994, p. 11) Jiang Canteng notes her eloquence in speaking the Minnan 閩南 (or "Taiwanese" *taiyu* 台語) dialect that is the native tongue of the majority of Taiwan's population, which appeals to nativist sentiments. (Jones 1999, p. 209) The austerity of her early practice, which included severe (but not extreme) fasting, scripture chanting, burning of incense scars, hand-copying sutras, and the making and keeping of difficult vows all contribute to her credibility and appeal. The display of supernatural light from her humble cabin gave her the cachet of the Buddhist saint, and to this day her followers point to her otherworldly demeanor. They frequently describe her gait as "gliding" rather than walking, and some of her nuns have commented that, even when going through mud to visit the poor, her shoes and the hem of her robe never got dirty even as theirs became sodden. Ciji literature refer to Zhengyan by the honorific title *shangren* 上人, or "superior person," an epithet that, in religious contexts, means something like "saint."

This focus on Zhengyan's charismatic personality, which serves as both magnet and motivator bringing people not so much to join Ciji as to convert to it, give the Association some unique features. Organizationally, it makes for a hub-and-spoke form of corporation rather than a bureaucratic one. Zhengyan is the unquestioned leader of Ciji, and all decisions and directives emanate from her. Many commentators, including myself, have noted that this presages problems in the future: Zhengyan is now over 70 years of age, and she has not just neglected to name a successor, she has actively refused to do so, noting how the historical Buddha likewise did not name the next generation leader of his *sangha*. (Laliberté 1999, p. 117) The sudden vacuum of power that will appear when she passes away will make for a difficult, but probably not fatal, period of transition.

The cult of personality that has coalesced around Zhengyan also gives her own role aspects more akin to the founder of a Japanese New Religion than a leader of a traditional Chinese Buddhist association. While it is true that Zhengyan did study Buddhist doctrines and scriptures to some extent, these have faded in importance as time has gone by. Her youthful dream of the woman bearing medicine that she had during her mother's illness, as well as the experience of Allied bombing campaigns during the second World War, gave her early practice a focus on the bodhisattva Guanyin 觀音菩薩 and the *Lotus Sutra*. However, over the years Zhengyan has become an incarnation of the bodhisattva Guanyin for her followers. Thus, as Huang and Weller comment, Zhengyan's own books have become quasi-scriptural for Ciji members, and are read, printed, and disseminated more than any Buddhist scripture by the organization. This lack of emphasis on higher Buddhist studies may seem odd for a figure whose tonsure master was the most revered Chinese Buddhist scholar of the early 20th century, but it is borne out by examining the publishing record of Ciji. André Laliberté has noted that, despite the prominence that education seems to enjoy as one of the four major elements of Ciji's mission, in fact the publications are relatively sparse when compared to Foguang Shan or

Dharma Drum Mountain,³ and the cultural outreach seems more aimed at proselytizing than education. (Laliberté 1999, p. 110)

At the same time, much has been made of the apolitical nature of Ciji. As an association that receives and disburses millions of dollars in funds each year and commands a bloc of hundreds of thousands of voters, politicians have certainly tried to tap into its power. Ciji itself has the potential to use its muscle to influence elections and governmental policies toward the poor, and, since its financial support comes from completely private donations and it relies on no governmental funding, political scientists have puzzled over the fact that it lets this power lie fallow. (Laliberté 1999, p. 119) Not only does Zhengyan herself stay aloof from political involvement, but the set of five precepts that she devised for her followers as an expression of a modernized Buddhist ethics includes the vow not to participate in demonstrations or political campaigns. (Huang 2006, p. 13) We may understand this from either the point of view of Buddhist traditionalism, or from the standpoint of *realpolitik*.

Many of Zhengyan's followers agree with her that Buddhism should be strictly apolitical. Her master Yinshun insisted that Buddhist clergy avoid political groups in a sentence that lumped them together with brothels and musical theater. (Laliberté 1999, p. 125) In Taiwan, calling a cleric a "political monk/nun" (*zhengzhi seng* 政治僧) is to criticize him or her. Zhengyan's refusal to advocate for structural changes in society or in the distribution of wealth may also reflect ancient Confucian moralism. Confucian teachings over the past two millennia have insisted that the rectification of the individual is all that is needed to create the virtuous society; it did not ever advocate, or even pay attention to, structures themselves as sources of evil even when staffed by good people. From the other view, however, we may see Ciji's lack of political involvement as more calculating. As some have observed, Ciji may not depend on the government for money, but it certainly needs government cooperation in other respects such as construction permits, accreditation of its educational institutions, and so on. In order to assure the smooth functioning of future operations, Zhengyan may have realized that it is good to cooperate with whoever wins the election, and thus wise not to take sides before the voters have spoken.

The Ciji Conversion Narrative

Even a charismatic leader can make no headway unless she is in the right place at the right time, and other scholars have seen her as the perfect person to channel charitable and religious energy in contemporary Taiwan. Ciji's period of spectacular growth began in the late 1970s and gathered speed through the 1980s, the period when Taiwan itself was undergoing rapid economic expansion – the so-called "Taiwan miracle." The sudden influx of cash into the economy boosted the standard of living at a dizzying rate, and many people, while enjoying this infusion of funds, had difficulty giving it meaning. Ciji, by providing an outlet for charitable giving, provided a way to dispose of some of the income in a way that created significance for it. Elise DeVido goes so far as to speculate that Zhengyan symbolizes Taiwan society's rise from initial poverty to sudden wealth, and the creation of meaning for that wealth in her own life. This makes her an apt

³ ³ Foguang Shan (佛光山) and Dharma Drum Mountain (*Fagu Shan* 法鼓) are the other two largest Buddhist organizations in Taiwan today, and each has an extensive commitment to Buddhist education and publishes scholarly studies as well as popular books.

exemplar for others struggling with the same issues. (DeVido 2004, p. 96-97) Members of Ciji frequently give testimonials about their transformation from dissolute men who either gamble and drink or devote all their energy to their jobs to the neglect of their families and society, or women who hang around department stores and are addicted to shopping and gossip, to citizens whose charitable activities give meaning to their money.

We may illustrate this point by examining stories from a book series that Ciji publishes about the lives of its core members called “Seeing the Form of the Bodhisattva” (*Kanjian pusa shenyong* 看見菩薩身影):

One book in this series (Yuan and Ruan 2005) deals with Mr. Huang Rongnian 黃榮年, a man whose father established a highly successful coconut-palm product export and processing business in Indonesia called the “Golden Light Group” (Jinguang Jituan 金光集團; a picture of the gleaming skyscraper that serves as the company’s headquarters in Jakarta appears on page 65). The youngest of four brothers, Huang learned from his father how to work hard day and night to grow a business, but also how to make the business good for the community. Even before joining Ciji, Huang was noted for treating his workers well (p. 64), and the company built schools in its workers’ communities and then handed ownership of them over to local government (p. 59-62). Still, Huang put in long hours under very hard conditions overseeing local projects in places that lacked even the most basic urban amenities, and the day came when he felt that he was giving too much of his life to his career, and wanted to spend more time benefiting others in ways not directly connected to the company. Thus, he joined Ciji. His brothers were skeptical of this move at first, but later admitted that this gave their younger brother a more balanced temperament and smoothed out his life (p. 67). Huang Rongnian’s case is emblematic of the male convert whose story describes a move from overwork and too much focus on career to someone who is able to relax and look beyond his own work life to embrace larger concerns.

The other usual story arc for male Ciji members involves turning away from typical male vices such as drunkenness and gambling to a life of virtue. A rather extreme example of this is a man called “old Lin” (*lao Lin* 老林), who was so addicted to gambling that he would deliberately write bad checks to cover gambling debts and then force his wife or grown sons to cover the checks in order to stay out of trouble. This behavior finally caused his family to expel him. Going on a trip with a friend to Hualian, which he had been led to believe was a vacation trip to local casinos, Old Lin found himself at the Still Thoughts Vihara (*Jingsi jingshe* 靜思淨舍), Zhengyan’s home temple. At first he was so angry at the trick that he ran away and spent the night in the forest around the vihara, but went back the next day and heard the master preach. She touched his heart and he repented in tears and became a stalwart Ciji member. His family took him back, he found new meaning for his life, and has led many others to join Ciji. (Huang 1996, p. 245-247)

While men’s conversion narratives tend to follow one of these two paths, the women’s stories seem more uniform, at least when the women in question come from families that were benefiting from the “Taiwan miracle” and suddenly found themselves doing very well financially. Wen Suzhen 文素珍, whose story is told in Yuan and Ruan 2004, grew up in a well-to-do family that had maids to do the cleaning and cooking. She says that from the outside, her life looked lovely, but inside she felt empty:

Because I had so much time, I did not know how to make use of it. Every morning I would get up and call my friends on the telephone to say how bad my life was. But to my family and friends, my life looked like heaven. I did not have to worry about either food or clothing. Actually, my mental life was in hell, because I was not happy. In the afternoon, I did not know where I would go to kill time; in the evening, I did not know which restaurant I wanted to eat at. Ten or so years ago, I might buy some article of clothing for 7000 or 8000 NT dollars, wear it twice, and then not wear it again because my friends had already seen me in it. [...] I got everything I enjoyed for myself, and I was unable to concern myself with others. (p. 16-17)

Apart from her pride and consumerism, she also felt she did not know how to be a proper wife and mother: “Before joining Ciji, I was very harsh with my husband because I thought ‘I am so loveable that since I was willing to marry you, you should of course give me good things to eat, nice clothes to wear, a good place to live, and good things to use,’ and I never had a bit of understanding of how hard he worked outside the house.” (p. 23)

Joining Ciji turned her from a useless, overconsuming parasite to a contributing member of society and instilled her good circumstances with meaning. She says, “I am very grateful to the Master for taking a bunch of disreputable women (*sanguliupo* 三姑六婆) who only know how to gossip and cruise department stores, and turned them into [women who can] throw themselves into social work, into useful people. I was able to change from a bad wife and a person with a narrow heart to someone who can understand how to repay kindness and be responsive.” (p. 23) She even stopped spanking her son, who thus thinks Buddhism is all right (p. 106).

Li Huiying’s 李惠瑩 story, told in Yuan and Ruan 2003, says some of the same things, but her account reveals an interesting quality of these women’s conversion stories. At the age of 25, she was working for the Hualian county government, and decided she needed to do better things with her life. She joined Ciji and went right to work in their cultural division, producing their radio and television programs. In talking about what she finds good about Ciji’s teachings for women, she says:

We women basically only know to window-shop and drink coffee, all day long and gossip about our neighbors. If we did not have the master’s teaching, I don’t know how much we would be able to engage in social welfare work! The master has taken [women with] excess energy but nothing to do and reclaimed us, making us into reusable recycled resources. [She is] truly a great environmentalist! (p. 35)

This is interesting because, while it echoes Wen Suzhen’s story as given above, it clearly does not represent Li Huiying’s own life. She joined Ciji at a relatively young age and while in far less privileged circumstances. Similarly, Huang Rongnian, while perhaps justified in feeling overworked, does not present us with the classic case of the narrow-minded businessman who lives for the next deal and neglects his family. His life story shows him as a decent man who, even before joining Ciji, took an interest in wider issues

and exercised care for his workers and concern for social issues. In both cases, one may suspect that a narrative has been retrofitted onto Li's and Huang's pre-Ciji lives.

These are instances of something that sociologists have long noted: that part of the process of conversion is the retrospective recasting of the convert's previous life into a standardized story line. (See Stark and Finke 2000, p. 122) In *Master Zhengyen: One Hundred Stories*, the benefit that Ciji brings to its female members is stated in this way:

Ciji has taken a lot of women and drawn them together and recycled them. It has caused them to cease wasting their time cruising department stores and gossiping about other people, and to become useful to society. (Huang 1996, p. 134)

In context, this is presented as a statement of what Ciji does, and is not attached to anyone's life story in particular. Thus, Ciji literature itself provides the script for the conversion narrative (at least for women), and so the process of becoming a female bodhisattva comes across in these terms, even if it does not strictly fit the biography of the individual telling the story.

We may also suppose that, if the "Taiwan miracle" created a class of people who needed meaning for their good fortune, then Ciji would not be the only organization to offer such meaning. Indeed, Richard Madsen reports interviewing a female member of another prominent Buddhist organization in Taiwan, Dharma Drum Mountain (*Fagushan* 法鼓山), who also represented herself as having been a dissolute shopaholic. Through her growing involvement in Dharma Drum Mountain's social service projects, she also came to feel that her life gained meaning and purpose. (Madsen 2007, p. 100) Clearly, the "Taiwan miracle" produced the need for a particular type of religious good, and Ciji has been the most successful (but not the only) purveyor of this good.

These are not the only story-lines in Ciji literature. Another common thread involves disabled people who formerly received Ciji's aid and decided to join Ciji out of gratitude, to feel useful by doing productive work, or simply because it gives them an opportunity for employment otherwise unavailable. (See, for instance, Guo 2006 and Ye 1996 for typical examples.) Beyond these stories of life-transformation, one must bear in mind the number of people who regard Ciji as a charity and contribute funds to help it advance its work without generating stories of conversion or life-transformation. I choose to emphasize the narratives given above because Ciji itself does, demonstrating through such activities as publishing books and articles publicizing them that such stories are important to its work and image.

The Ongoing *Pas de Deux* between Almsgiving and Philanthropy

The Ciji bodhisattva is a modern bodhisattva. Neither an ordinary Mahayana devotee practicing rituals to feed hungry ghosts or accumulate merit nor a godlike celestial being performing miraculous rescues, the Ciji bodhisattva is the middle class individual who is materially successful but whose energies seem misdirected in overwork, vices, or consumerism and gossip. Upon joining Ciji, they practice compassion through a combination of traditional Buddhist piety conjoined with modern "scientific" social welfare work. They do not simply give alms as a spiritual discipline without regard to the concrete effect that their donation will have (or not have) upon the recipient.

Rather, they take case histories, organize efforts to achieve maximum efficiency, generate statistics to measure outcomes, and work through entirely transparent, non-mysterious ways to achieve their goals. They are truly practitioners of “Buddhism in the human realm” (*renjian fojiao* 人間佛教).

One way to focus on some aspects of Ciji’s modernization is to look at parallel developments in western philanthropy. In the pre-modern west, charity was, by and large, equated with almsgiving directed at individual recipients identified as needy (beggars) or institutions whose receipt of one’s gift rendered religious merit (monasteries and churches). In Buddhism, we recognize the former in the extravagant tales of alms given by the Buddha in previous lives as recounted in the *Jataka* tales, and in stories of great acts of compassion done by great Buddhist masters such as Asanga. The latter echoes the Buddhist monastic order as a particularly good recipient of donations. They are the “field of merit” (*futian* 福田) into which one sows one’s seeds of charity in order to reap merit later, the recipients whose worthiness amplifies the merit-making potential of the gift. As observed in the rise of modern “scientific charity,” Ciji rejects both of these. As we saw in the biographical sketch, Zhengyan refused to take donations directly, and Ciji, like any western charity, takes donations on behalf of the poor and discourages direct cash prestations to individual beggars. (See Bishop 1902 and Rosner 1982 for the western case.)

Premodern charity also operates primarily from religious rationalization in which the act of charity is recommended as a means of spiritual self-cultivation that benefits the giver. At least in the case of gifts to individual beggars rather than institutions, the worthiness of the recipient does not enter into consideration. Neil Rushton, reporting on the almonry of Westminster Abbey in the Middle Ages, notes that the abbey dispensed its alms in conformity to patristic ideals that explicitly excluded any “means-testing” of the recipients. (Rushton 2004, p. 67-70) Proceeding into later periods, we see various Christian authors actively discouraging means-testing as an impediment to the spiritual growth available through the practice of charity. William Law (1686-1761) exhorted his readers:

It may be, ... that I may often give to those that do not deserve it, or that will make an ill use of my alms. But what then? Is not this the very method of Divine goodness? Does not God make ‘His sun to rise on the evil and on the good’? [Mt. 5:45] Is not this the very goodness that is recommended to us in Scripture, that, by imitating of it, we may be children of our Father which is in Heaven, who ‘sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust? ... Now this plainly teaches us, that the merit of persons is to be no rule of our charity; but that we are to do acts of kindness to those that least of all deserve it. ... [S]urely I am not to deny alms to poor beggars, whom I neither know to be bad people, nor any way my enemies. (Law 1906, p. 82-83)

In a similar vein, Robert Crowley (1518?-1588), after affirming the existence of bad and deceitful beggars, concludes his poem *Of Beggars* with this sentiment:

Yet cease not to give to all, without any regard;

Though the beggars be wicked, thou shall have thy reward.
(Quoted in Bremner 1994, p. 32)

A more characteristically modern approach to charity emerged in the mid-19th century in the west. While not excluding religious values as a motivation, it re-envisioned the task of the donor and the role of the recipient. Spiritual self-cultivation became a side-effect of philanthropy; lifting the poor from their condition and helping them become self-sufficient, contributing members of society, or providing a safety net for those truly disabled became the main goal. To this end, authorities discouraged indiscriminate giving to individual beggars on the grounds that it led to “pauperism,” a state of permanent dependence imposed on someone who otherwise could work. Scientific charity, with its distinction between deserving and undeserving poor, its horror of an indiscriminate alms that would encourage “pauperism,” and its use of means testing and concern for efficiency, comes from this period.⁴ Charity should be directed either to those who really cannot do for themselves because of disability, and toward those who could be rehabilitated. It also sought to make the lives of those supported by charity wretched enough that they would never rationally choose to live permanently as beggars. (Bishop 1902, p. 599; Rosner 1982, p. 365-66) To this end, case workers took applications from and made field visits to potential beneficiaries in order to determine what they really needed in order to pull themselves out of poverty, and to distinguish the “truly needy” from the shirker and free rider. Charity became organized in order to share information and maximize efficiency.

Similar developments may be noted in China. Vivienne Shue, in a 2006 article in *Modern China*, recounted the case of an institution called the “Hall for Spreading Benevolence” (*Guangren Tang* 廣仁堂) in Tianjin. Founded in 1878, on the cusp of modernity, the hall originally served a purely Confucian end: in order to preserve the chastity of widows (particularly young widows), the hall provided a fortress-like shelter for them and their children. The founders, having gotten them off the street and out of the way of sexual misconduct and danger, declared its goals met and made not further provision for the inmates. However, as the 20th century came, the newer vision of organized charity intruded, and the directors of the hall began to think about the inmates as “cases” whose needs required assessment in order to provide services that would eventually get them out of the institution and back into normal lives. These services ranged from vocational education for their children to matchmaking services for the widows and their daughters. (Shue 2006)

This progress from “almsgiving” to “modern scientific charity” has been neither uniform nor inevitable. Indeed, the paradigms of “premodern” and “modern” charity can only serve as “ideal types” against which to interpret the reality. This being the case, we must not look at the growth of Ciji expecting to find a simple transition from one model to another. Indeed, the mixture of the traditional and the modern in Ciji’s rhetoric and practice calls for more sophisticated analysis, which will appear in the concluding

⁴ The edition of William Law’s *Serious Call* that I used for this research came out in 1906, when such concerns were most new and salient. Perhaps in response to the climate of opinion prevalent at that time, the editors added an endnote after Law’s call for indiscriminate almsgiving: “Law acted on these principles himself; and the effect on the poor of King’s Cliffe was the reverse of satisfactory” See Law 1906, p. 355, n. 17.

section. For now, it is sufficient to note this mixture in Ciji's very traditional rhetoric of Buddhist almsgiving alongside its use of case studies, needs assessment, and modern technology in the delivery of its beneficence. In addition to these features, we also noted above that Ciji literature recounts many stories of formerly shut-in recipients of charity who went to work for Ciji, mostly in its recycling operations, and thus achieved self-sufficiency, an outcome much sought in modern charities that wish to discourage pauperism. In its own way, Ciji has followed the arc seen in the overall trajectory of charity both east and west.

Concluding Analysis

The reasons why Zhengyan and the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Association have been such objects of fascination for scholars and reporters should be quite clear by now. Its sheer size and the loyalty it evokes from its many members make it a force worthy of note to observers of the religious and political scene. Beyond its sheer heft and muscle, however, there are many other angles from which one may analyze them. I will conclude with a few brief remarks on aspects that I find salient, noting first that there are many other ways to approach and understand Ciji. (For instance, the fact that Ciji is primarily a women's organization makes it an apt subject for analysis from the women's studies perspective.)

Zhengyan may at first appear to operate out of a matrix of beliefs and practices that mix the traditional and the modern in perplexing ways. Her leadership is based on traditional Buddhist practices (scripture services, incense scents, asceticism, simplicity, vows, and even miracles), yet her organization is anything but traditional. Ciji is a modern, rational, technologically advanced, and efficient charitable organization that measures its success in quantifiable results (money raised, volunteer time given, number of names in its bone marrow registry, funds disbursed, patients treated, and so on). Her followers appear also to exhibit the same mix of the traditional and the modern. On the one hand, people note her otherworldliness and charisma, respond to even a few words from her with tears of repentance and changes of life, make vows to be reborn along with her in their next lives, and experience personal transformation. On the other hand, they fully support the modern, progressive agenda of Ciji even when it means repudiating traditional Chinese medical practices and beliefs to make way for modern, technological medicine and the donation of bone marrow and cadavers. Ciji itself uses very modern technology in its medical practices, educational facilities, broadcast programs, and other endeavors, yet refuses to embrace a modern view of political involvement and advocacy for any structural changes in society, choosing instead to remain committed to a venerable Confucian view of morality and change. Zhengyan and Ciji are not fully traditional, but they are not fully modern, either.

A useful heuristic for teasing apart the various components of this mix is a distinction that Bruce Lawrence used in his analysis of fundamentalism: that between "modernity" and "modernism." The first is simply the trappings of modernity, above all its technological advances. "Modernism," on the other hand, is the worldview of the modern global citizen: the disparagement of the miraculous, the drive for quantifiable results, the rationalization of programs in order to achieve goals with maximum efficiency. A religious group may reject both the technology and the worldview (as some

Amish groups do), may embrace the technology but reject the worldview (as a televangelist who uses the most advanced communications technology to broadcast a traditional religious message), or may embrace both (as many mainline Protestant denominations have done). (Lawrence 1989, p. 27)

Ciji is clearly an organization of this last type, modern but not wholly modernist. However, typology does not substitute for analysis, and this identification serves only to broach the deeper question: Why would Ciji choose this identity and strategy? We can begin by noting a genuine ambivalence in the narrative of Ciji that reflects the ambivalence of Taiwan Buddhists as they made a transition from a traditional agrarian society to a modern technological one, and rose rapidly from poverty to prosperity.

Zhengyan's life spans this transition. She was born toward the end of the Japanese colonial period, a period marked by the beginning of this transition. The Japanese application of modern medical practices had already been showing its effectiveness for some decades when she was young. (Jones 2003, p. 30-31) Growing up in a town family rather than a rural farm family, she would have had more exposure to this in her youth. After the end of the Second World War, just as she was discovering Buddhism and trying to find her path within it, she replicated Taiwan society's own vacillation between attachment to the traditional past and the attraction to the benefits of modernity. For others, the management of this conflict led to a rejection of the past and the advancement of new visions of Buddhism adapted to the times, but Zhengyan sought a way to blend the two.

When she found that blend by elevating a highly traditional Buddhist virtue, compassion, to prominence and found that her very traditionally-conceived charisma could attract support, she found that way. She could appeal to Buddhists and gain followers through very traditional means in order to support very modern ends. She could even make those ends meaningful in traditional terms. A daily donation of cash became a means of self-cultivation. The donation of one's cadaver became an act of compassion based on the bodhisattva's willingness to immolate his whole body as praised in the *Lotus Sutra*. But this time, rather than a self-immolation that served no rational end, the donation of one's body helped train medical students so that they would be better doctors and heal people in the future.

The mix of the traditional and modern in Ciji also looks like good strategy if one applies the distinction between *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*. The former is an association of people who pool their resources in order to pursue a common goal in the most efficient way. The latter names a group of people who come together for deeper reasons: shared values, a need to forge lasting relationships, a common identity, and so on. For the members of a *Gemeinschaft*, efficient pursuit of common goals flows from these factors, and may be incidental to them, whereas for the *Gesellschaft* it is the organization's entire rationale. It is the difference between a church and a trade association. (Renwick Monroe 1994, p. 884)

If we look at Ciji through this lens, then its blending of the premodern and the modern make more sense. Ciji is not merely a *Gesellschaft*-type association of individuals whose sole purpose is to organize medical care for the indigent. It is a *Gemeinschaft*-type group of people who come together to leave behind a past identity—workaholic, gambler, gossip, parasite—and adopt a new common identity—compassionate Mahayana Buddhist. In this way, their gifts of time and funds are more

than just a “good deed”; it is an expression of their core identity. Richard Madsen, working alongside Ciji members to build housing after the catastrophic earthquake of September 21, 1999, observed: “The volunteers treated their work not simply as an instrument to achieve some good end, but as an expression and actualization of their Buddhist sense of interconnectedness with all beings.” (Madsen 2007, p. xvii) Through his or her volunteer efforts, then, the converted Ciji Buddhist manifests his or her sense of self.

As Nancy T. Ammerman asserts, the formation of a new identity is not simply a cognitive act; it flows from practice:

In such a [postmodern] world, old analytical notions of identity, organization, and function are not nearly as helpful as an analysis based on practice. Practices are both structured and fluid. Practices require choosing agents, but situate those agents in social and cultural contexts. What I have tried to suggest here are some of the ways in which our study of religion might be transformed by recognizing the full implications of the postmodern world that modern voluntarism has created. (Ammerman 1997, p. 213-14)

In the case of Ciji, this means that the conversion establishes both a new identity and a new praxis, and that subsequently the praxis continually expresses and reinforces the identity. But the Ciji convert is not the sole agent at work here; a *Gemeinshchaft* is an association of many actors, and the other members contextualize both the identity and the praxis. Having undergone the conversion process and become a “Ciji Buddhist,” members now find their practice of charity reframed. Within this *Gemeinschaft*, they display their charitable acts in front of a new “reference group” of other Ciji members, which sets the bar of charity higher than it might be in other reference groups or in the population at large. (see Rose-Ackerman 1996, p. 714 for the idea of “reference group.”)

It is crucial to remember that individual selves are not given; they are constantly negotiated and re-negotiated. In her survey of theories of altruism, Kristen Renwick Monroe describes a cognitive approach to altruism in which an important component is the actor’s “schema,” a way of organizing the world so that the self can situate itself vis-à-vis others and the world itself. To boil her text down a bit, she describes a scenario in which the individual actor negotiates an identity through interaction with the world. After these interactions, the actor then develops a narrative that articulates and justifies the schema. (Renwick Monroe 1994, p. 884) In this way, Ciji seems to know that its members need a certain narrative in order to re-vision themselves in the world. The standard narratives (women who shop and gossip, men who devote too much of themselves to work) are vital tools in a conversion process essential to a reschematization and the construction of a new identity: the Ciji Buddhist, the one who serves others, the one who is of help to the world.

To summarize, then, this article has presented various factors of Ciji’s membership, organization, and charitable activities. It came into being at the end of a process of modernization that appears to have transpired both in China and the west whereby “almsgiving” became modern “scientific charity.” Its founder, more urban than rural in her background, saw the process of modernization and economic development in Taiwan during her lifetime. During this period, many people came into sudden wealth,

and their good fortune required the creation of meaning for it. At the same time, modernization, economic development, and new technology caused traditional religions to rethink their place, and the scope of their worldviews needed reframing so as to accommodate these new conditions.

Zhengyan brilliantly crafted an organization that responded to all of these exigencies. It retained traditional Buddhist ideas about generosity and spiritual self-cultivation in such a way that people whose wealth required meaning could come together in a *Gemeinschaft*-style organization in which they could find such meaning in concert with a new group of significant peers. The modern methods of charitable giving and disbursement accorded well with their economic and educational backgrounds and did not appear to be a step backwards into the past. Their conversion and the formation of a new identity amplified the charitable response and brought forth a much greater outpouring of charitable giving and volunteer time than a *Gesellschaft*-style organization could have mobilized. For all these reasons, the modified model of “modern but not modernist” in Lawrence’s typology made sense as a strategy that served a number of needs and purposes.

In short, Zhengyan has learned how to assist people in bridging the gap between traditional culture and modernity by using a re-interpreted traditionalism in order to point them toward modernism. The question that Ciji will face in the future, therefore, goes beyond simply picking a successor who can glide in Zhengyan’s shoes. It will also have to re-evaluate this approach. Four decades after Ciji’s founding, Taiwan society is now fully modernized, and it may well be that no-one requires this transitioning strategy anymore. Will Ciji hold on to the methods of its founder, or will it have to find new ways to articulate and carry out its mission to a generation whose diminished attachment to tradition no longer impedes the pursuit of modernist goals? Will it still inspire conversions that bring people into a *Gemeinschaft*, or will it devolve into a *Gesellschaft* that organizes effort without recasting identities?

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