

On the Earthly Buddha: Taiwanese Buddhism, Capitalism, and Worldliness

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Abstract

This piece discusses the relationship between Buddhism and capitalism as well as depicts the role of Buddhist groups, associations, and organizations in modern Taiwan, especially the “trio” Fo Guang Shan, Tzu Chi Foundation, and Dharma Drum Mountain, in developing economic activities and humanitarian works. Furthermore this piece will review “theological bases” of current Taiwanese Buddhism - its religious ethics and teachings - in relation to the “worldly matters” (e.g. economics and other humanistic issues), and look at the historical roots of the above contemporary reformist Buddhist groups. Influenced by the works of Weber, this article reexamines his classical and controversial thesis regarding non-Western religions, especially Buddhism, and its linkage to the spirit of capitalism and worldliness.

The Taiwan Miracle: Some Explanations

Since the 1980s Taiwan has witnessed an extraordinary economic growth and spectacular achievements and has undergone a remarkable transformation metamorphosing from an apparently poor agrarian society into an affluent industrial nation that later with these economic increases led the region as one of Asia’s “Four Tigers,” along with Hong Kong, South Korea, and Singapore. The speed of this transformation has exceeded that of developed countries during their period of early industrialization: twice the rate of growth of the United States and Japan and three times that of England (Skoggard, 1996). Characterized by the entrepreneurial ingenuity of small firms and medium-sized industries, Taiwan’s rapid economic development now has been already fully recognized internationally. With the gross national product of about \$1,100 in the 1950s to approximately \$11,600 in the 1990s and with the gross domestic product (GDP) of \$631.3 billion during 2005s, Taiwan has become one of the fastest developing regions in the world.

Taiwan scholar Tu Weiming has noted that Taiwan is the 17th largest economy in the world, 14th largest exporter, the 16th largest importer, and one of the largest holder foreign exchange reserves of more than \$500 billion. Through nearly three decades of hard work with a good economic management, Taiwan has transformed itself from an underdeveloped

and agricultural island to an economic power that is a leading producer of high-technology goods. Hence it is understandable if Weiming idealizes Taiwan could have reached a “triple win” strategy for peace and prosperity at once: “to become thoroughly global in its economy, to negotiate sufficient space for practical political activities in the international arena, and to serve as a major contributor to the intellectual resources of Cultural China” (Weiming, 1996, p. 1120).

In an effort to explain Taiwan’s unusual economic growth, many socio-political analysts and economists such as Alice Amsden, Thomas Gold, and Robert Wade have argued that Taiwan’s industrialization is largely the result of free market liberation policies enacted by the state. This “miraculous Taiwan” - these theorists have argued - is as an outcome of the strong state-endorsed economic policies, especially those of land reforms initiated by Chiang Kai-shek after his KMT government moved from Nanjing to Taipei. During the 1990s, to liberalize economy, Taiwan deregulated various financial areas, including banking, stock market, trade, finance, and so forth. This deregulation was also a sign of Taiwan’s desire to join the World Trade Organization (M. Rubinstein, 1994; M. A. Rubinstein, 2006). Indeed many theorists, especially the disciples of Asian economic development, argued that the strong Asian states - the bureaucratic, authoritarian regimes that have autonomy from society and the administrative capacity to act - have created the conditions for rapid economic development. Countries like Singapore, Malaysia, China, and Indonesia during the New Order show this tendency, but how about Taiwan?

Gary Hamilton makes a fascinating point regarding economic booms in Taiwan. Unlike other theorists who see the growth of Taiwan’s economy from “top-down” standpoint, Hamilton views the role of culture and organization as key factors of economic thrives in the island. It is the extra-state social organization, Hamilton argues, that “creates Taiwan’s

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market culture” (Hamilton, 1998, p. 41). Although he recognizes the contribution of the states policies and programs in enhancing economy in the region, the effects of state actions are more limited. Otherwise he sees the institutional patterns of Chinese society, particularly the dynamics of connections among families and friends, shape Taiwan’s market culture, which in turn forms the very organization of the economy itself (*ibid*: 68-69).

Instead of seeing political, cultural, or organizational factors, the focus of this piece is to scrutinize the linkage between the startling economic growth and religious values and practices in Taiwan, especially Buddhism. It was the sociologist Max Weber, who popularized the connection between religious ethics and doctrines and the emergence of the capitalist ethos. In his classical piece that appeared during the years 1904 and 1905, Weber wrote a controversial book and has become among the most debated work in history and social science: *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber hypothesized that the Protestant ethic, ideally represented by Calvinism and the Puritan sects, could account for the emergence and the development of modern capitalism.

Weber, however, obviously noticed that the singular economic complex of capitalism had only developed in the Protestant-dominated countries (e.g. Western Europe and the United States). The capitalist ethos and the Protestant ethics (esp. Calvinism), Weber argued, had become unique experiences of Western (Europe) societies and never traveled to non-European/non-Protestant countries. Weber had judged that countries like China (dominated by Confucianism and Taoism) and India (dominated by Hinduism and Buddhism), although capitalist beginnings and conditions of economic development could be observed in these societies, “capitalism in the Western sense *did not emerge*” (emphasis added, Weber 1958, p. 51; cf. Weber, 1964). Weber, then, sought factors in non-European civilizations and cultures that blocked the rise of capitalism and found out that in those societies there had not been religions amenable to capitalist development.

In the light of Taiwan which is dominated by Buddhist-Taoist beliefs and folk religions and other “Asian Tigers” like China (Confucianism), India (Hinduism), South Korea (Buddhism), Japan (Shinto, Buddhism), Singapore (Confucianism, Taoism), Malaysia (Islam), where their economy has grown significantly, Weber’s thesis remains critical, weak, and fragile.¹ Scholars like Robert Weller (1994, 2000, 2006), Mayfair Mei-hui Yang (2004), David Jordan (1972), and Arthur Wolf (1974), in their numerous ethnography-based scholarly works, have convincingly argued the connection between local beliefs, religious sects, and folk religions and the economic growth in both China and Taiwan. Based on these accounts, religion-stimulated capitalist ethos has traveled to Taiwanese societies (and elsewhere) and not unique experiences of Western societies as Weber claimed.

This article aims, first, to reexamine Weber’s thesis on the relationship between religious ethics and the spirit of capitalism, and second, to provide intellectual grounds regarding the role of religion, particularly Buddhism, in creating economic growth in Taiwan. Examining Buddhism in

relation to the “worldly matters” such as economy is challenging because this particular religion has often been associated with the “otherworldliness” and asceticism - among the reason why Weber judged that the “spirit of capitalism” would not arise in China and India. Although Buddhism is among Taiwan’s significant major religions, there are only a few academic resources examining the role of Buddhism in advancing Taiwan’s economic growth. Most academic works, furthermore, focus their analysis on the contribution and the connection between Taiwan’s folk religions and religious sects and the economic development.

As among major Taiwan’s religion, the existence of Buddhism in the participation of creating the capitalist ethos and “market culture” and in turn in advancing economy-related issues cannot be avoided. New Buddhist groups, associations, and organizations like the Compassionate Relief Merit Associations or *Ciji Gongdehui* (Tzu Chi Foundation), whose memberships and branches spread around the world and the Homemakers’ Union, for instance, have a tremendous contribution in creating foundations for economic development, providing basis for charity, utilitarianism and humanitarian ethos. Other foremost Buddhist organizations such as the duo *Fo Guang Shan* (lit. “Buddha’s Light Mountain” also called “The International Buddha Progress Society”) and Drama Drum Mountain also have a significant role in the participation of creating “capitalist ethos” and the spirit of entrepreneurship in the region. The above “Buddhist facts” are certainly interesting issues for further study and discussion.

Based upon the description sketched above, the following questions are of particular importance to this piece: how can Buddhism, which is often connected to the “unworldly matters,” create the spirit of capitalism? In what ways can Buddhism shape non-theological matters and “worldly things” like economic activities? More specifically what is the role of the above Buddhist groups, associations, and organizations in developing economies and other humanitarian works in Taiwan? And what are the “theological foundations” for those Buddhist groups in shaping the “capitalist ethos” and the spirit of worldliness? To answer the questions, first this piece will review the role of the above Buddhist associations in developing business activities in particular and worldly-related matters in general, and then try to look at the theological foundations of these groups for such worldly activities by tracing back the history of Taiwanese Buddhist reformation movement in the early 20th century as the groundwork for the “new Buddhism.” This reformation, furthermore, has provided a new direction of understanding and thinking toward the modern Taiwanese Buddhist teachings and precepts moving Buddhism out of the monastic, philosophical, textual, and unworldly traditions into the secular world, contextual and real life dealing with fundamental human problems.

Buddhist Associations and Humanistic Activities

“Taiwanese Buddhism is no longer the faith of poor monks, but rather a multi-million dollar business. Now it

is facing new challenges as it attempts to expand its reach.” This interesting notice appeared in the on-line edition of *Taiwan’s Merit Times*, a daily newspaper run by the island’s Fo Guang Shan Buddhist Society on April 23, 2003. Founded in 1967, Fo Guang Shan (literally means “Buddha’s Light Mountain” and has also been called the International Buddhist Progress Society) is a Taiwanese Mahayana Buddhist monastic order aiming at propagating Buddhist teachings through cultural activities, fostering talent through education, benefiting society through charitable programs, and purifying human hearts and minds through Buddhist practices. This Buddhist order has gained a worldwide presence having branches in more than thirty countries around the world. It is also considered as one of the largest charity organizations in Taiwan. The founder of Fo Guang Shan is Venerable Master Hsing Yun (Van. Xingyun), a monk of extraordinary fame and popularity under whose leadership a single temple in the southern part of Taiwan developed into a worldwide network of sub-temples,² charitable foundations, social welfare agencies, and other auxiliary organizations.

From its official founding on May 16, 1967, Fo Guang Shan has continuously expanded and now it encompasses more than 3,500 monasteries. In addition, the order has built children’s homes, retirement homes, high schools, and television station. It is renowned that the order has committed to the development of education by building public universities, Buddhist colleges, libraries, publishing houses, translation centers, and the maintenance of service and mobile medical clinics. Still, as noted by Charles Jones, the original temple now covers the entire mountain and serves as a pilgrimage site for Buddhists from all over Taiwan, and its facilities house an enormous range of activities: Buddhist studies institutes offering courses in Chinese, English, and Japanese; a high school, a public library, several bookstores and gift shops, conference facilities capable of accommodating large-scale international gatherings, a museum, audiovisual and multimedia facilities, classrooms for teaching, martial arts, vegetarian cooking, and calligraphy, and the list goes on and on (Jones, 1999, pp. 187-188). Fo Guang Shan (or Fo Guang Buddhism), moreover, has been renowned for their endeavors in promoting “humanistic Buddhism,” a modern Chinese Buddhist philosophy developed through the 20th Century. Humanistic Buddhism aims at making Buddhism relevant in the world and in peoples’ lives and hearts. Like most modern Chinese/Taiwanese Buddhist organizations, the ordination lineage is from Rinzaï Zen School.³ However, Fo Guang Shan declares that it is a combination of all Eight Schools of Chinese Buddhism, including but not limited to Pure Land. In this sense, Fo Guang Shan is a monastic order and not merely a doctrinal school of thought. Fo Guang Shan is not the only extraordinary Taiwanese Buddhist association and group that has a pivotal role in creating economic growth and capitalism in the island.

Besides Fo Guang Shan there are The Tzu Chi Foundation (*Ciji Gongdehui* - the Compassionate Relief Merit Associations) and Drama Drum Mountain, which also have a tremendous contribution in the development of economies and businesses and humanitarian services, as well as in the creation

of the spirit of entrepreneurship and the ethos of philanthropy and charity in the island. The Buddhist Compassion Relief Foundation or the Tzu Chi Foundation (hereafter, Tzu Chi) is one of the famous Taiwanese Buddhist associations that has worldwide reputation regarding those efforts. Founded by Zhengyan (Dharma Master Cheng Yen) on April 14, 1966 in the impoverished coast of Taiwan, Tzu Chi began with a nun (the founder), five disciples, and thirty housewives who contributed pin money of NT \$0.50 each day to help supplement medical fees for the poor. Now the Foundation is renowned as the largest social civic organization in Taiwan, claiming over 5 million supporters and over 30,000 certified commissioners around the globe. It has also been reported that Tzu Chi donates for charity over US \$20 million per year, aids flood victims in the People’s Republic of China, famine sufferers in Ethiopia and other African countries, and helps victims of natural disasters around the world. Since the Foundation opened a chapter abroad in 1985, now it has branches in fourteen countries.⁴ Tzu Chi’s transformation from small members and tiny donations to millions of supporters and a major multinational charitable organization occurred in the late 1980s, the era when Taiwan entered economic booms.

It is crucial to recognize that since its beginning, Tzu Chi emphasized “pragmatic actions” in the world by offering help, material aids, and love to people. A volunteer-based, spiritual, and welfare organization, Tzu Chi’s missions focus on giving material aid and inspiring love and humanity in both the givers and receivers. Since its founding, Tzu Chi has dedicated itself to the field of culture, environment, charity, medicine (viz. founding a hospital, a children’s rehabilitation center, and a medical research center), education (viz. a nursing and medical school), and has devoted its efforts to promoting universal values, humanity and community-based volunteerism.⁵ The humanitarian work is both a means to help those in need, and also a way to open the eyes of the volunteer to the harsher side of life, so that through giving, they may find spiritual happiness and life’s true meaning. In fact Tzu Chi has been contributing to better social and community services, medical care, education and humanism in Taiwan for nearly 40 years since its inception. The founder Master Cheng Yen firmly believes that suffering in this world is caused by material deprivation and spiritual poverty. She felt that “lack of love for others” has been the root of many problems in this world so to save the world, to borrow her own words, “we must begin by transforming human hearts.”

It is interesting that unlike most lay and clerical Buddhist movements in China or Taiwan, Tzu Chi spend little time reciting *sutras* or chanting the names of Bodhisattva. As well, this Buddhist group does not encourage monastic life and asceticism as a way of achieving perfections and *nirvana*. Instead, they focus on building a Pure Land in this world through “secular manner” and humanitarian action. Core members of Tzu Chi may chant a *sutra* and discuss their master writings in dealing with the problems of daily life. Furthermore Cheng Yen might talk about Buddhist *sutras*, but only as they relate concretely to the real experiences of Tzu Chi’s members. Huang and Weller (1998, pp. 282-283) have noted that Cheng Yen’s most frequent reference

is to the Lotus Sutra⁶ (*Fahua Jing*), which emphasizes the Bodhisattva's role in helping others to reach enlightenment. However, the discussion always turns on real action of humanity rather than Buddhist philosophy, ritual, and text.

Another Taiwanese Buddhist association which has similar vision to Fo Guang Shan and Tzu Chi Foundation is Drama Drum Mountain. It developed from Nung Chan Monastery (founded in 1975) and the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Culture, which were both founded by Venerable Master Dongchu. At that time, Ven. Dongchu devoted his efforts to promoting Buddhist culture in Taiwan, cultivating Buddhist human talent, and holding an annual winter charity event.⁷ Although Dharma Drum Mountain does not have extensive financial resources, in contrast to Fo Guang Shan and Tzu Chi Foundation, its influence is far-reaching. This Buddhist organization has promoted a healthy ethos in society and provided effective methods for spiritual practice. Since Dharma Drum Mountain formally declared its visions in 1989 to uplift the character of humanity and build a pure land on earth, all the organization's subsequent projects and activities have been based on this fundamental motif.

In addition, since the organization declared the concept of protecting spiritual environment in 1992, Dharma Drum Mountain has received international recognition regarding their efforts in maintaining the green earth. Since its founding, Dharma Drum Mountain has become an organization that gathers the collective energies and vows of the public and channels them to promote the happiness of all humanity. Recently, on December, 2006, Sheng Yen Education Foundation endowed grants worth millions of dollars to the University of Columbia to conduct professorship and research on Chinese Buddhism. In order to express the highest reverence to Ven. Master Sheng Yen and Sheng Yen Education Foundation for their generous support, the university has named this world's first professorship in Chinese Buddhism "Sheng Yen Professorship." Master Sheng Yen proposed three major directions to this program, first the recent development of Buddhism across the Chinese Straits, second the development of contemporary Chinese Buddhism in the areas that have been influenced by Chinese Buddhism such as Japan, Korea, and Vietnam; and third - and this is the most interesting part - the dialectic between tradition and modernization in Buddhism.⁸

Come Down from the Mountains: A Buddhist Reformation

The above "trio" Taiwanese Buddhist associations: Fo Guang Shan, Tzu Chi Foundation, and Dharma Drum Mountain, which have strong visions and vibrant actions in engaging basic human problems and taking care of worldly things such as doing business activities and handling poverty, ignorance, backwardness and so forth are a relatively new phenomenon within Buddhist traditions. Their visions and actions are a form of radical transformation moving from unworldly, monastic, static, and textual traditions to worldly, secular, dynamic, and contextual ones. The ways they engage into "human realm" coming down from the mountain have remarked a new direction within the history of Bud-

dism. This remarkable reformation began since about forty years ago when Taiwan's Buddhist monks, led by refugees from the mainland China, came down from the mountains, exchanged their begging bowls for Palm Pilots, and - riding on the crest of Taiwan's transformation from agricultural backwater to high tech economy - extended their vision of "Buddhism in the Human Realm" way beyond their island's shores.⁹

The groundwork for this Taiwan's "Buddhism in the Human Realm" (*renjian fojiao*) was not without historical roots. Its foundation was rooted in the works and thoughts of Chinese Buddhist reformers notably Yinguang (1861-1940) in the early last century. Yinguang, along with Taixu, modern Chan master Xuyun, and the *vinaya* reformer Hongyi, were considered the four greatest monks of the modern period (Jones, 1999) who led radical reformation toward Buddhism's teachings and the Pure Land concept. In facts, in terms of practice, Pure Land Buddhism dominates in today's Taiwan, and major contemporary Taiwanese Buddhist reformers, especially the monks and nuns, were among 1.5 million refugees from China's eastern seaboard who fled to Taiwan in 1949s along with the Nationalist government. It is important to recognize that Yinguang was the monk who had conceptualized the Pure Land as a concrete goal and a real destination, and not as a purified state of mind as in the belief of traditional Buddhism.¹⁰ Yinguang's life and thoughts are significant to understand because they constitute the framework of the modern Pure Land belief in Taiwan.

There are two direct channels through which Yinguang's influence entered Taiwan: the breviary and Li Bingnan, Yinguang's disciple. Breviary is a book containing liturgical texts to be recited at Buddhist monasteries. Although there is no agency that regulates the compilation and the use of breviaries - and any temple and devotional society is free to adopt whichever texts they wish to use, one breviary in particular that has gained wide acceptance throughout Taiwan today is the *Fomen Bibe Kesongben* (essential recitations for the Buddha-gate). This Taiwanese Buddhist breviary was adopted from Lingyan Shan Temple liturgies in which Yinguang had a pivotal role in compiling and composing this new version of breviary.¹¹ This reformed breviary was brought and introduced into Taiwan by Yinguang's most influential disciple on the island by the name of Li Bingnan. Born in 1890, Li Bingnan was one of the most influential laypeople in post-Retrocession Taiwan who worked ceaselessly for over forty years to spread Yinguang's message within Taiwan's Buddhist circles. His lectures reached millions of people over the thirty-eight year period between his move to Taiwan and his death in 1986. Like Yinguang, he propounded a fusion of Confucian ethical standards with intensive study of Buddhist doctrines, the strict observance of precepts, and simple Pure Land piety. These principles have remained the model for most of Taiwan's Pure Land practitioners to this day.

Another significant Buddhist figure who has strong influence on the contemporary Taiwanese Buddhist reformers such as Master Hsing Yun (Fo Guang Shan), Master Cheng Yen (Tzu Chi), and Master Sheng Yen (Dharma Drum Moun-

tain) is certainly Yinshun (b. 1906), a well-known secularizing and reformist monk. He had made his case for religious reform in the early 1950s but was silenced when the Buddhist establishment suggested that his position constituted leftist agitation (Huang & Weller, 1998, p. 381). Yinshun represents the other side of Chinese Buddhism's modern revitalization. Despite he is careful to distinguish his own thought from that of his mentor Taixu, Yinshun still acknowledged his heavy debt to Taixu's vision of a modernized Buddhism.

One of his most successful attempts in applying a modern reformulation of Buddhist ideals is a modification of one of Taixu's notions, that is, the idea of "Buddhism of Human Life" (*rensheng fojiao*), which Yinshun reworked as "Buddhism in the Human Realm" (*renjian fojiao*) (Jones, 1999, p. 133). Yinshun strongly criticized the old-fashioned Chinese Pure Land practice for making Amitabha Buddha into a kind of god and his Pure Land into a sort of heaven. Instead, he evoked the ideas of "earthly Pure Land" and "worldly Buddha." In short, his fundamental theological ideas laid on the precept of, in the term of monotheist tradition, a kind of "anthropocentrism" (human as a *centrum*) rather than "teocentrism" (god as a *centrum*) (Rahman, 1979).

The emphasis of "earthly Pure Land" (and "worldly Buddha") has taken hold in many segments of today's Taiwan Buddhism. The socially progressive Buddhist magazine *Buddhist Culture* took as its guiding editorial policy the "founding of the Pure Land among humanity." As well, it is also mentioned that the purpose of the Sheng Yen Education Foundation is to promote educational endeavors that work to purify people's mind and society based on Master Sheng Yen's vision of "uplifting the character of humanity and building a pure on earth."¹² Still, many temples, especially in urban areas, post signs that express the purpose of the temple's programs in terms of creating this "earthly Pure Land" and "worldly Buddha." The temples frequently offer social welfare programs and try to implement environmentally conscious practices viz. eschewing disposable dishes and chopsticks in favor of reusable ware.

Furthermore, today's charismatic Buddhist monks, nuns, and reformers like Hsing Yun, Cheng Yen, or Sheng Yen have also been strongly influenced by the humanistic Yinshun's vision of "Buddhism in the Human Realm." They have translated this Yinshun's "theology" into a real practice by doing business activities, establishing agencies for humanitarian works, building charitable foundations for helping people overcome their problems, conducting economic and developmental programs for increasing better life and so forth. Still, having been influenced by this new vision of worldly Buddhism, Taiwan's Buddhist groups grew into corporation-like organizations, vying for market share and expanding aggressively with slick marketing campaigns. The academic Chiang Tsan-teng calls this phenomena "department store Buddhism." (Hoh, 2002)

Indeed, Taiwan Buddhist societies are a kind of "religious business enterprises" and this "spirit of capitalism" is formed and influenced by the "humanistic vision" developed by those reformist Buddhist groups. By conducting business activities - and was successful - in that manner these Bud-

dhist groups have been able to spread their influence across the world. Fifty years ago most people in Taiwan looked to the West as the only source of all progress while Buddhism remained the low image of the poor uneducated monk with nothing to offer a society looking to modernization. Today, Buddhist organizations are affluent, wealthy, and are sending priests to prestigious universities and colleges in the west to pursue master's and doctorate degrees in various fields. They have made impressive use of media and information technology and have even adapted such traditional Christian activities as weekend retreats for lay people, children's camps and cell groups for their own use. Taiwan is the only Asian country where ordination of women as Buddhist nuns is fully accepted and as a result women play a prominent role in Taiwan's Buddhism as it is shown by the enormous phenomena of the "Ciji Mamas" (Tzu Chi). The Taiwan's "Ciji Mamas" are a concrete example of "feminist action" (not to say "movement") in responding to global human issues.

Thus, it is obvious that contemporary Taiwanese Buddhist associations such as Tzu Chi, Fo Guang Shan, and Dharma Drum Mountain have inherited progressive visions of Buddhism echoed by early Buddhist reformers. Those current Buddhist reformers then further continue and develop their religious restoration and vision and then transform it into local and current contexts. Over the years, Hsing Yun has articulated a set of principles for producing Buddhism able to operate within the modern world. These principles have been collected in a book entitled *How To Be a Fo Kuang Buddhist*. There are at least three fundamental principles of Hsing Yun's vision. First, Fo Guang Shan commits completely to the organization and to a wider society. Second, Fo Guang Shan concerns itself with worldliness rather than otherworldliness issues. Here in order to enable Fo Guang Shan to act effectively and compassionately within the modern world, Master Hsing Yun revalues and criticizes conventional Buddhist doctrines which strongly emphasize unworldly matters and future lives.

He explicitly rejects pessimistic evaluations of this world as a "flaming house" or a prison. He states, "Undeniably, the main cause of the decline of Buddhism today is its excessive concern with attaining supra-mundane liberation and its failure to reach out to the people. Consequently, people mistakenly believe that Buddhism is negative and pessimistic and do not know that the spirit of Mahayana Buddhism is to serve society" (Jones, 1999, p. 194). Based on this line of reasoning, Master Hsing Yun urges his monks and nuns to become active and engage with wider societies, not limited to Buddhist communities, and to pursue training in service occupations such as medicine and teaching. Liberation from the cycle of birth and death must be held as a long-term goal to be achieved gradually through extensive study and practice. This is a critique to the traditional practice of Buddhism where monks and nuns frequently found themselves drawn more and more into the business of conducting funerals.

Many early reformers, such as Yinguang and Taixu, as well as their later heirs in Taiwan like Yinshun and Zhenhua, also described how the traditional Buddhist practice of "funeral business" was a major cause of Buddhism's poor

image and its decline into specified commercialism. As a result, under the flag of “Buddhism for Human Life” (evoked by Taixu) or that of the modified version of “Buddhism in the Human Realm” (echoed by Yinshun), they called for a new orientation and a fresh reformation towards the Buddhist teachings and doctrines, as well as for a transaction of living human beings rather than dead ones.¹³ The third principle of Hsing Yun’s reform ideals is privatism in any form. As it is stated in Fo Guang Shan’s official website, one of his goals in establishing such an order was to recreate a public monastery for Chinese Buddhism worldwide. The distinguishing feature of a public monastery is that it serves as an ordination center for the sangha as a whole. In order to keep the system impartial, a public monastery of the past on the Chinese mainland did not permit its resident clergy to privately accept disciples (Welch, 1967, p. 132).

Besides Hsing Yun and his Fo Guang Shan, early Buddhist reformers have also influenced Master Cheng Yen as it is shown in her speeches and articles which were later compiled into a book entitled *Still Thoughts*.¹⁴ Like Fo Guang Shan which relies upon religious values and the vision of its founder, Tzu Chi Foundation’s actions are strongly based on the religious and moral vision of Master Cheng Yen. Her vision and thought have provided a rationale or “theological basis” for its members’ continued involvement beyond the effect of Cheng Yen’s personal charisma. As early Buddhist reformers, Cheng Yen’s ethical religious thesis is a creative mixture of Confucianism and Buddhism as well as traditional and modern values. Master Cheng Yen is familiar with both *Analects of Confucius* and the *Mencius*¹⁵; and her thinking reflects Confucian concepts in two primary ways: in the exaltation of the virtue of filial piety and her belief that individual moral refinement leads outward to rectification of the family, society, and nation.

Like Confucius and his adherents, Cheng Yen believes that the key to solving the ills of society lies in the personal cultivation of the individual. Likewise Cheng Yen creatively interprets traditional Buddhist teachings with a new lens and contextual approach, viz. the term *daochang* traditionally denotes a temple or meditation hall where one works on spiritual cultivation, but she calls upon her disciples to think of their everyday workplace as a *daochang* - a place of the way. In a similar manner, Cheng Yen interprets the traditional six perfections of Buddhism in light of the association’s social welfare work. One begins with the perfection of giving or charity (Pali: *dana*) by setting aside one’s resources of time and money in an attitude and love. In this way, she points out, giving becomes religious self-cultivation.

In the Buddhist teachings, the *dana* (“giving or charity”) becomes one of the major principles or essential virtues, besides *sila* (morality), *karuna* (“compassion, pity”), *maitri/metta* (“love-kindness”), and meditation (*bhavana*) (De Lubac, 1954; Chakravarti, 1987). *Dana* is the means, par excellence, for acquiring merit in kammatic Buddhism. To be sure, merit is also acquired through morality (*sila*) but giving (*dana*) is the royal road, and the wealth required for giving must be accumulated by economic action. The salience of the belief in *dana*-acquired merit as a primary

means of salvation provides a powerful motive for economic activities and the spirit of entrepreneurship in the Buddhist communities (Spiro, 1970, p. 454). Cheng Yen’s idea of *dana* (charity), however, differs from earlier Buddhist movements by focusing on the notion of charity as a way of improving *karma*. It emphasizes concrete action in this world to solve human problems by doing humanitarian works and allowing everyone to act as a bodhisattva.

Where does the idea of modern Buddhist charity in China and Taiwan come from? Some scholars refer to the influence of Christian tradition, especially Protestant, which in the nineteenth century spread their missions to the mainland China by doing social work, humanitarian service, and charity. They claim that the Chinese Buddhists was impressed by this Christian social work and by the development of Christian colleges, charitable foundations, and church hospitals.¹⁶ Moreover, according to this line of thought, the Chinese Buddhists copied those Christian charity and social services into their own contexts. Yet Protestant evangelists, when the Protestants arrived in China, reportedly found a poor China where Buddhist monks were lax, unlearned, and too uncaring to help others. Perhaps there is a linkage or “indirect influence” between the Christian charity and Buddhist one.

Such a conclusion, however, seems biased, fragmented, uncritical, oversimplified, ahistorical as well as tends to disrespect Buddhist traditions and historical accounts which in fact are very rich with the experiences and principles of charity. Whalen Lai (1992, pp. 5-32) makes valuable accounts regarding the history of charity within Chinese Buddhism. Lai traces back the practice of charity within Chinese Buddhism to the T’ang dynasty, where Hsin-hsing of the Three Periods sect turned the “universal donation” into an “inexhaustible treasure store.” What came down in historical memory as the “infinite treasure store” is really writ large. In addition, Lai noted that during the Late Ming, private philanthropy activities had been organized by the local Buddhist notables, and then such actions had been continued during the Ch’ing.

Not only approved by historical accounts, such a charity tradition was also found at the Buddhist scriptures and precepts. In the *Hsiang-fa chueh-i ching* (HFCIC), a native scripture compiled in Loyang between 517 and 520 for instance, there is a text that urges people to donate continuously to the “field of compassion.” By giving priority to the “field of compassion” (meant more for the laity) over the “field of reverence” (meant more for the monks), the HFCIC might have made it possible for lay sects to put social welfare ahead of building temples, copying sutras, and supporting monks (Lai, 1992).

It is also crucial to acknowledge that the philanthropic traditions had been inspired by the Buddhist ideal of *pao-en*, repaying the gracious aid that one owes others, either now or past lives. Lateral charities are expressions of this gratitude. Still, the tradition of “wealth redistribution” rite, a ceremony in which everyone tries to touch all the gifts so as to share in the merit of them all rather than in that of his own, is also significant regarding charity or giving culture within Buddhism. Such a custom would later grow into the Mahayana

theory and practice of merit transference. This sharing went with another principle in Buddhism known as the “equal division” of all goods. The regulation says that any gift to the *sangha* (“Buddhist church”) should be shared equally among all members; and this rule is based upon the fundamental principle of Buddhism so-called *pratiya-samutpada*, that is “everything is interconnected.” Thus there is an essential difference between Buddhist and Christian charity, namely in Christianity, everything is ultimately dependent on God, while in non-theistic Buddhism, everything is interdependent; consequently the reciprocity of giving in Buddhism is more lateral than hierarchical.

Symbolized by the Indra’s Net,¹⁷ the doctrine of interdependence in the Buddhism is very central; it can even be said to be a cornerstone of Buddhism. Thomas Cleary, the translator of *The Flower Ornament Scripture*, explains that the whole belief of Buddhism is a philosophy of the universal interdependence of all that exists as parts of a sacred whole. It refers to Buddha’s “teaching body” so-called *Dharmakaya* - “all things, all beings, mind, and space itself are bodies of Buddha” (Cleary, 1984, pp. 19-21). In addition, with regard to the philosophy of this Indra’s Net, biologist Mary Clark makes a valuable explanation. She says, “The Indra’s Net is a metaphor for a world of connectedness, of interacting, interdependent entities, whether they are human bodies, an economy or other social arrangements, an ecosystem, or a galaxy. Within each entity, the parts are likewise interdependent, and it is their reciprocal interactions that keep the whole universe functioning. Indeed, each part, each entity *contains* the whole, is the whole, and nothing can survive apart from the whole. No entity is unconnected to, unaffected by, all the others” (Clark, 2005, p. 9 - emphasis as its original). Hence, Buddhist teaching, as captured in the Gestalt of Indra’s Net, leads to a very different theory of human nature. It rejects notions of competition, of “self,” and of dominance over, while embracing the need for constantly seeking harmonious relations with all-that-is. Since the purpose of life is to discover meaning, not to achieve power, “winning” is an alien concept in Buddhist thinking.

Thus the idea and the practice of charity or giving within contemporary Buddhism, including that of Taiwan, have had deep historical and textual roots, not simply as an impact of Christian influence. Having traced the larger history of charity in China and the religious texts of giving in Buddhism, how does one now read the Protestant report that Buddhist monks were lax, sloppy, uneducated, and too uncaring to help others, or toward the Christian claims that the contemporary philanthropy of Buddhism is influenced by Christianity? In China, Buddhists probably have learned to appreciate and to emulate the Christian charities. But perhaps Christians might also learn from the Chinese/Taiwanese experience with Buddhist economy on a human scale and mutual aid based on a just sharing of goods. Now the world witnesses that the impact of Chinese-Taiwanese Buddhist groups and organizations to the western countries is tremendous. The world likens a market, where everyone can give and take, as well as sell and buy “human products” (concepts, religion, technology, cultures, traditions, etc.).

The fact that today’s Taiwanese Buddhist associations have translated the Buddhist concepts and philosophy, and have transformed the historical facts of Buddhist charities into real actions and concrete activities of humanity and economy-related things, is unquestionable. Master Cheng Yen of Tzu Chi Foundation, for instance, believes that suffering in this world is caused by material deprivation and spiritual poverty. Additionally, she felt that lack of love for others has been the root of many problems in this world. Accordingly to save the world, she affirms, one must begin by transforming human hearts. Since humans live under the same sky and breathe the same air, she continues, so they should help and care for one another. Tzu Chi was built in 1966 on the basis of love and that remains its core mission. “Love is all-powerful; it can soothe and calm a fretful and disquieted heart, as well as heal the wounds inflicted by calamities,” declares Master Cheng Yen in her Tzu Chi’s official website.

Moreover she states, “The hope of humanity lies in mutual help. In times of crisis or suffering, Tzu Chi volunteers are like a beacon of light. They bring hope and inspire others with their generous spirit and unconditional care. Love is the sole driving force in their mission; they are givers of love, food, care, shelter, and clothing, anything that will alleviate suffering. But in helping others, they also plant seeds of love. They expect nothing in return, other than for the same unconditional love to be extended to others. When those being helped can begin helping others, the cycle of goodness would have come full circle. We firmly believe that the use of force will not end the turmoil on earth. Only through an open loving heart can we truly change the world to a better place for all to live in, alleviate the suffering of mankind, and reverse the trend of violence and destruction. When the goodness in every human being is awakened, world peace shall be possible.”¹⁸ To sum up, it is obvious that Master Cheng Yen’s religious reformation, especially in terms of Buddhism and its relationship to non-theological issues such as economics and other humanistic-worldly matters, is deeply rooted in the fundamental principle, doctrine, and philosophy, of Buddhism such as the concepts of *dana* (“giving, charity”), *pao-en* (“repaying the gracious aid”), *pratiya-samutpada* (“interconnectedness”), *dharmakaya* (“all beings, things, and mind are bodies of Buddha”), “wealth distribution ritual,” equal distributions of goods, and many others. Still, such a religious reformation is transformed from the historical experiences of Buddhist monks and laypeople in terms of philanthropic activities. All those things have stimulated the rise of the spirit of unique capitalism in Taiwan and have encouraged Taiwanese Buddhists to be actively involved in issues of humanity and worldly matters such as economic development and other socio-political spheres. In short, Master Cheng Yen’s revolutionary ideas, also of other Taiwanese Buddhist contemporary reformers, do not uproot from Buddhist teachings, traditional doctrines, and historical accounts. But rather their breakthrough notions in reforming Buddhism are a sort of dialectical relationship between modernization and traditions.

The need to balance between “modernization” and “tradition” actually has become the real challenge of any religion,

not only Buddhism. How to be modern but still rooted in, to borrow Vaclav Havel, “transcendental anchor” is the challenge for anyone who wants to reform their religion. In the Islamic context the ongoing debate among Muslim scholars is how to balance between modernity (*hadatsah*) and tradition (*ashalah*) (Safi, 2003). Religion, indeed, on one hand is demanded to adapt to the development of modernity in order to exist in the modern era, and Taiwanese Buddhist reformers have successfully transformed their traditional Buddhism, which is characterized by static, philosophical, unworldly, ascetic, gender-biased” and so on into a modern Buddhism which is typified as dynamic, realistic, worldly, feminist, humanistic, and anthropocentric. Interestingly, this reformation breakthrough has gone peacefully and nonviolently without bloody violent conflicts as the Abrahamic religions, particularly Christianity and Islam, the religious-political transitions of which were marked by violence and war! That Taiwanese Buddhist accomplishment certainly has given a major contribution for the creation of global humanistic civilization and has provided an excellent model for attempts at achieving a nonviolent, peaceful religious reformation.

“Earthy Buddha”: Closing Remarks

The extraordinary phenomena of contemporary Taiwanese Buddhist groups urge me to rethink and revisit the classical and biased Weber’s thesis that “capitalist ethos” would never emerge in ascetic and unworldly religions like Buddhism (Weber, 1958). The Taiwan facts have proven otherwise, unfortunately. Indeed the phenomenon of Taiwan, along with China, Japan, South Korea and other developed Asian societies, is a crucial test of Weber’s theory of the connection between Asian religions and capitalism. In Japan, Bellah’s classic study of Tokugawa religion (1957) illustrates that Buddhist and Confucian ideas were transformed and harnessed to a kind of a worldly-activistic ethic. If Weber argued that Confucianism and Buddhism were not conducive to capitalism, the case of Japan proves otherwise whereby both religions were transformed and, in the appropriate circumstances, were employed to promote, in the words of Tambiah (1973, p. 17), “rational economic activity” - i.e. capitalism.

Just like the fact of Japanese Buddhism, the “Taiwan miracle” challenges Weber’s thesis. In an attempt to criticize Weber, internationally well-known sociologist Peter Berger (Berger & Hsiao, 1988, p. 7) “teases” him as follows: “I have imagined a number of times that the good German professor (i.e. Max Weber) would come back to life today, say on top of a high-rise office building in downtown Taipei, that he would take one look out the window and say, ‘Well, I was wrong!’ Berger is right and Weber was wrong. As I depict in this piece, in Taiwan, some Buddhist associations have been actively involved in “capitalist activities” and have participated in producing entrepreneurship ethos of Taiwanese society, especially Buddhist communities, and have contributed for the creation of the “Taiwan miracle” without being afraid of losing their identities as Buddhists.

Moreover they have successfully married “traditional

Buddhism” with the spirit of modern values as well as the demand of global market (“capitalism”). As a result, Taiwanese Buddhism is capable of performing a unique “religious capitalism” or a sort of what Mei-hui Yang calls “ritual economy”.¹⁹ On one hand they have done business acts, economic and capitalist activities, forming a kind of “bourgeois Buddhism,” as well as other humanistic works to support their *sangha* and Buddhist communities in particular and the wider society in general, either in Taiwan or other countries. On the other hand those Buddhist groups do not leave their religious practices and traditional rituals of Chinese Buddhism. In other words, these Buddhist groups have critically combined traditional values of Buddhism (i.e. otherworldliness, asceticism, ecclesiastical piety, etc.) and contemporary dimensions of modernity, including capitalist materialist acquisition. This is an astonishing phenomenon of the “Earthy Buddha.”

Footnotes

¹Critiques and comments toward Weber’s controversial thesis has been found elsewhere, see, among others, Tambiah (1973), Parsons (1935), Forcese (1968), and Means (1965). Special comments responding Weber’s analysis on “Islam” and capitalism” see Turner (1974).

²Among the branch temples of Fo Guang Shan have been noted to be huge and extravagant like Nan Tien Temple in Australia, Nan Hua Temple in South Africa, Hsi Lai Temple in the United States. For more information about Fo Guang Shan’s worldwide networks and their visions, programs, and activities in responding human problems see their official website at <http://fgs.org.tw>.

³Rinzai school is one of the three Japanese zen sects. Moreover Rinzai itself is the Japanese line of the Chinese Linji school, which was built by Linji Yixuang (Japanese: Rinzai Gigen) during the Tang dynasty.

⁴For more information about Tzu Chi Foundation visit its website at <http://www.tzuchi.org> and for academic analysis for the Foundation see, among others, Huang and Weller (1998: 379-396).

⁵Tzu Chi Foundation’s missions and actions, in many ways, resemble Christian Anabaptist-based organization Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) and Edhi Foundation, a non profit organization based in Pakistan, founded by Muslim philanthropist Abdul Sattar Edhi. Just as Tzu Chi, MCC (founded in 1920) and Edhi Foundation (founded in 1951) have dedicated to humanitarian works such as disaster relief, health/medical services, etc. throughout the world since its founding.

⁶The Lotus Sutra is probably the preeminent teaching of the Mahayana canon attributed to Shakyamuni Buddha. It has become one of the most popular and influential Mahayana sutras in East Asia and became the basis on which the Nichiren sects of Buddhism were established.

⁷In 1978, Master Sheng Yen succeeded Venerable Master Dongchu as the abbot of Nung Chan Monastery and the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Culture, carrying on his master’s vocation and popularizing the Buddha Dharma by converting it into concepts and methods that everyone can understand accept and use. As the number of devotees at Nung Chan Monastery and students at the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies continued to increase, in 1989 a plot of land in Jinshan Township, Taipei County, was purchased. Master Sheng Yen named this land “Dharma Drum Mountain,” and the organization Dharma Drum Mountain was formally established.

⁸For more information about Dharma Drum Mountain and their concerns, visions, objectives, and “worldly activities” visit its website at <http://dharma drum.org>.

⁹Most Taiwanese society credit this “Buddhist reformation” to, among others, Master Hsing Yun, Master Cheng Yen, Master Dongchu, Master Sheng Yen - the founding fathers of the above “trio” Buddhist associations, for their endeavors in bringing Taiwanese Buddhists into “new world.” They deserve credit because through their hands Buddhism has had a positive reputation internationally, especially in terms of their humanistic efforts. Master Hsing Yun with his Fo Guang Shan he founded close to Kaohsiung in 1967 which today it boasts 173 branches in over 30 countries runs various humanistic programs worldwide. Founded by a woman nun Master Cheng Yen, the Hualien-based Tzu Chi Foundation also runs the world’s third-largest registry of bone-marrow donors along with hospitals and an international relief organization that has operated everywhere from Afghanistan to the Caribbean. Another is the Dharma Drum Mountain Society, which is opening a new multi-million dollar temple complex just north of Taipei. Besides the “trio” above, there is the Ling Jiuo Shan Buddhist Society, which in 2001 opened the doors to its ultramodern US \$66 million Museum of World Religions in Taipei. Still, the Chung Tai Chan Monastery inaugurated a vast new US \$110-million temple in central Taiwan in 2001 (Hoh, 2002).

¹⁰In China, for several centuries, there had been two competing ways of thinking about Pure Land practice, first was “Mind-Only Pure Land” which held that the Pure Land emerges when the mind is purified, and second, the opposing stream was “Western Pure Land” practice which held that the Western Paradise of Amitabha Buddha was a real, concrete destination, and the goal of Pure Land practice was to attain rebirth there after death. Yinguang obviously belonged to this later camp (Jones, 1999, p. 118)

¹¹After Yinguang replaced the abbacy of the Lingyan Shan Temple in Suzhou, he called for the compilation of a new breviary that would exhibit a definite doctrinal slant towards the Pure Land. This was the first conscious effort to produce a breviary for a particular form of Buddhist thought and practice, and it resulted in a drastic reduction in content. Yinguang omitted much of the material contained in the Chanmen Risong (daily recitations for the gate of chan which was produced by Haichuang Temple in Guangzhou in 1792), particularly the instructions and materials concerning the traditions of the various schools, which had made up almost one-third of previous breviary (Jones, 1999, pp. 120-122).

¹²See at <http://www.shengyen.org.tw/eng/eng.htm>.

¹³It is actually a typical movement of puritanism, either in Christian or Islamic tradition. Such a movement usually concerns about real human issues and worldly matters rather than the hereafter-related things. The debate between “modernist” and “traditionalist” groups of religions usually relies upon such issues (in the case of Indonesian Islam, see e.g. Bowen, 2001)

¹⁴The book is reminiscent of the “recorded sayings” genre in Chinese Buddhist literature, and its influence has been enormous: as of 1992, it had been through one hundred printings, and in 1990 was number three on the Taiwan best-seller list. In addition, it has been reported that many elementary and middle school teachers use it as a supplementary text on ethics.

¹⁵The *Mencius* is a book contained Mencius’s conversations with his king. It is considered to be one of the Four Books that Zhu Xi grouped it as the core of orthodox of the Neo-Confucian thought. Mencius (372-289 BCE) himself was a Chinese philosopher who arguably the most famous Confucian after Confucius himself. Mencius’s interpretation of Confucianism has generally been considered the orthodox version by subsequent Chinese philosophers, espe-

cially the Neo-Confucian of Song Dynasty.

¹⁶Not only China, this line of thought said that Christian social work impressed all Buddhist leaders, from Dharmapala in Sri Lanka, Buddhadasa and Sulak Sivaraksa in Thailand, to the New Religions in Japan, all copied the Christian ways of social service and charity. On issues of the comparison between Chinese Buddhist and Christian charities see Lai, 1992, p. 5-32.

¹⁷The Indra’s Net, an imaginary net of jewels reflecting each other with the reflections of each jewel containing reflections of all the jewels, comes from Mahayana Buddhist tradition, from around 2000 years ago. Indra was the chief of the Aryans who overran the Indian subcontinent beginning around 5000 years ago and wove their own myths with those of the local Dravidians, Vedic form of Hinduism.

¹⁸See at <http://www.tzuchi.org>.

¹⁹The “ritual economy,” Mei-hui Yang explains, cannot be seen merely as the result of economic development, for ritual life has also fueled economic growth. Economy and production are part of the ritual and religious system. Derived from her study on the economic development of the southeast coast of China Wenzhou, Mei-hui Yang economic activity cannot be separated from ritual dimension, whose structures inform economic practice, and one cannot understand forms of economic hybridity without taking ritual and religion into account.

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