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Merit Without Measure: Notes on Buddhist Charity in Xiamen, Fujian

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Master of Arts  
in Religious Studies

by

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January 2018

The thesis of Sarah Veeck is approved.

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January 2018

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## ABSTRACT

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by

Sarah Veeck

In recent years, a growing number of Buddhist groups have established officially registered charitable foundations. One response to this development from political scientists has been to ask whether or not the growth of religious charities signals the development of an autonomous civil society in the PRC, which might, in turn, promote democratization.

This project is based on interviews with staff and volunteers from seven Buddhist charities in Xiamen, Fujian, and it argues that policies encouraging the development of Buddhist charities have interacted with developments within Buddhism during the reform period to encourage this recent growth. These policies aim to instrumentalize Buddhist charity to serve state policy goals related to social welfare and cohesion. However, Buddhist charity also continues to also draw on practices of almsgiving, merit-making, and ritual sponsorship that are not fully in alignment with, and are perhaps even subversive of, the utilitarian-productivist ethics promoted in the official discourse of the party-state.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Introduction .....	1
II. Literature Review: Religious Charities in the PRC .....	13
III. Buddhism During the Reform Period and the Development of Buddhist Charities....	18
A. State Discourse on Buddhism, Charity, and “Traditional Chinese Values” .....	19
B. Humanistic Buddhism .....	40
C. Almsgiving, Merit-Making, and the Ritual Economy.....	52
D. Summary .....	65
III. Fieldwork Methods and Findings .....	68
A. Methods.....	68
B. Field Site: Distinctive Features of Xiamen .....	70
C. Xiamen’s Buddhist Charities: An Overview.....	76
E. The Ritual Economy and Charitable Fundraising .....	86
F. Case Study: A Chaodu Ritual Fundraiser .....	91
VI. Conclusions and Discussion .....	95
References.....	102

## I. Introduction

For some time, the state of “civil society” or the “public sphere” has been a preoccupation in scholarly discussions of China.<sup>1</sup> This is true of both historical scholarship and studies of contemporary China. So, it is unsurprising that existing academic literature on religiously-affiliated charities in mainland China centers on the implications of religious charities for the configuration of relationships among the state, religion, and what is variously referred to as “civil society,” the “third sector,” the “social sphere” (*shehui jie* 社会界), or the “public sphere” (*gonggong lingyu* 公共领域).<sup>2</sup> One question posed by Western political scientists is whether or not the growth of religious charities signals the development of an autonomous civil society in the PRC, which might, in turn, promote democratization. This approach to the topic implicitly draws on a particular definition of civil society organizations “as components of a social force in opposition to the state, resulting in, or by nature a part of, the democratization process.”<sup>3</sup>

However, Robert Weller, among others, has convincingly critiqued the injudicious application of the analytic of “civil society” beyond the Western European context within

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<sup>1</sup>Frederic Wakeman, Jr., “The civil society and public sphere debate: Western reflections on Chinese

<sup>2</sup>e.g. Yuan Tongkai and Guo Junli, 袁同凯, 郭俊丽, “Zhongguo zongjiao gongyi cishan yanjiu de huigu yu qianzhan” 中国宗教公益慈善研究的回顾与前瞻 [Retrospect and prospect of research on Chinese religious charity], *Beifang minzu daxue xuebao* 北方民族大学学报, no. 6 (2015): 36-40; Susan McCarthy, “Serving Society, Repurposing the State: Religious Charity and Resistance in China,” *The China Journal*, 70(2013), 43-72; Laliberté(2012), 95-117; André Laliberté, “Buddhist Charities and China's Social Policy,” *Archives des sciences sociales des religions*, 158 (2012), 95-117.

<sup>3</sup>Jonathan Schwartz and Shawn Shieh, “State and Society Responses to China’s Social Welfare Needs: An Introduction to the Debate,” in *State and Society Responses to Social Welfare Needs in China: Serving the People*, ed. Jonathan Schwartz and Shawn Shieh (Routledge, 2009), 9.

which the concept was developed.<sup>4</sup> Weller takes issue with the Eurocentric introjection of distinct, opposed categories of “state” and “civil society” in cases where it is difficult to locate these categories within either normative values or concrete social practices in a given social context. What’s more, a clearly demarcated split between “state” and “civil society” might be better understood as a prescriptive ideal rather than a description of empirical reality even in the Western European/North American context where theories of “civil society” initially developed and gained currency. Weller observes that even in the United States, the belief that civil society organizations possess, or aim to achieve, autonomy from the state may be overstated.<sup>5</sup> Instead, empirical evidence suggests that many NGOs are closely intertwined with the state. For example, many NGOs in the United States receive a significant portion of their funding from government grants and often pursue objectives in alignment with state policy goals.

In an authoritarian political context, the incentives for civil society organizations to pursue a relationship of enmeshment and interdependence with the state are, one might assume, even greater. And, in fact, existing research on Chinese NGOs does confirm that most organizations pursue a strategy of collaboration and negotiation so as to find common ground with the state. Far fewer organizations seek positions of autonomy from, much less overt confrontation with, the state. Many of the important actors in China’s NGO sector are “government-organized NGOs”—i.e. nonprofit organizations created by government initiatives, which may rely on government funding, be staffed by former government personnel or employ personnel with concurrent positions in government agencies. A survey

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<sup>4</sup>Robert P. Weller, introduction to *Civil Life, Globalization and Political Change in Asia: Organizing between Family and State*, ed. Robert P. Weller, (Taylor & Francis, 2004), 6.

<sup>5</sup>Weller, 6.



of nonprofits in Xiamen found “little evidence of autonomy from the government or even of a desire for autonomy.”<sup>6</sup> Instead, nonprofits may prefer to “think of themselves as semiofficial, regardless of their real relationship to the state, because that is the position they want to occupy.”<sup>7</sup> This semi-official position is attractive because it “maximize[s] their power to negotiate and maneuver between society and state.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, certain charities explicitly adopt the posture of supporting and supplementing the government’s efforts to provide for the welfare of the public. For example, Nanputuo Temple Charity includes, in its self-introduction, the statement: “With the government, share tribulations; for the masses, relieve hardships.”<sup>9</sup>

For understanding charities affiliated with officially organized religions in mainland China, the concept of a civil society defined in terms of autonomy and opposition to the state is not very helpful. Clear-cut distinctions between church and state, freedom or suppression, and autonomy and subjugation shed little light on the situation. This is, in part, because officially recognized religious organizations and the state are mediated by organizations that, seemingly, belong to both sectors. Indeed, Ding Xueliang coined the term “political amphibiousness” to characterize those organizations within China’s system of social management that occupy an intermediate position between the state and particular social

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<sup>6</sup>Robert P. Weller, “Civil associations and autonomy under three regimes: the boundaries of state and society in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China,” in *Civil Life, Globalization and Political Change in Asia: Organizing between Family and State*, ed. Robert P. Weller, (Taylor & Francis, 2004), 82.

<sup>7</sup>Weller, “Civil associations and autonomy,” 82.

<sup>8</sup>Weller, “Civil associations and autonomy,” 82.

<sup>9</sup>“为政治分忧，为民众劫难。” Nanputuo Si Cishan Hui 南普陀慈善会, “Cishan Hui Jianjie” 慈善会简介, Nanputuo Zai Xian, 南普陀在线, April 11, 2017, <http://www.nanputuo.com/nptcsh/html/200701/2115530166487.html>.

groups.<sup>10</sup> For Buddhists, the most relevant example of a “politically amphibious” organization is the Buddhist Association of China (*Zhongguo Fojiao Xiehui*, 中国佛教协会), which has the role of communicating government policies to Buddhists, supervising their activities, and representing their interests to the government. My point here is not to over-emphasize the top-down efforts of the state in promoting Buddhist charities at the expense of overlooking the initiative of Buddhist clerics, lay donors, and volunteers. Nor do I wish to exaggerate the degree to which the goals, outlooks, and incentives of Buddhist organizations and the state are aligned. Rather, I simply wish to point out that, structurally, and by design, officially registered religious organizations’ relationships with the state are characterized by a substantial degree of overlap and interpenetration.

According to Robert Weller, the attitude “that NGOs *should* represent society to the state, from a position of independence” (emphasis added) characterizes much of the existing literature on NGOs in Asia.<sup>11</sup> On the face of it, a clear-cut distinction or oppositional relationship between state and society, or state and religion, does not match the realities of officially recognized religious charities in China, given the structure of the legal and regulatory framework in which they are enmeshed. Thus, in many cases, the concept of autonomous civil society is being deployed less as a descriptive category than as a normative standard, on the basis of which the situation in China can be evaluated. As a normative standard, it provides a basis for condemning CCP policies for the management of religious affairs and NGOs, and/or the complicity of religious organizations. Presumably, the basis for

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<sup>10</sup>Ding Xueliang, "Institutional Amphibiousness and the Transition from Communism: The Case of China." *British Journal of Political Science* 24(1994): 293-318, cited in Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank, "The Politics of Reviving a Buddhist Temple: State, Association, and Religion in Southeast China," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 65, no. 2 (May 2006), 341.

<sup>11</sup>Weller, "Introduction," 6.

this condemnation is that civil society organizations provide institutional support to grassroots movements and oppositional politics, promoting the representation of popular interests and preventing abuses by state authority. With regards to Buddhist organizations, the concern is that subordination to state interests results in changes—e.g. the commercialization of temples as tourist sites in the interest of economic development—that are ultimately injurious to the condition of Chinese Buddhism.

Critics of the discourse promoting “civil society” have pointed out that, in some cases, it is deployed in such a way as to conflate grassroots voluntary associations with domestic and international NGOs. This discourse encourages a lack of cooperation with international NGOs, and permits the harassment of grassroots activists and religious communities to be interpreted similarly—i.e. viewed as clampdowns on civil society.<sup>12</sup> This allows for a convenient rhetorical slippage between authoritarian regimes’ suppression of grassroots organizations and social movements, the resistance that non-Western authoritarian regimes present to the free operation of international NGOs (as well as to the unimpeded movement global flows of capital), and, ultimately, the obstacles that a strong public sector poses to private interests.

This critique paints international NGOs as “an increasingly important part of the international regulatory system” of global capitalism.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps unwittingly, international NGOs can act as “Trojan horse for neoliberalism,” privatizing state functions, and thereby

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<sup>12</sup> For example, a recent article in the neoliberal-leaning publication *The Economist* on China’s policy towards religion and NGOs treats new registration and reporting requirements for international NGOs as a clampdown on civil society: “Charity ends at home: China’s leader guards against nasty foreign influences,” May 5, 2016, <https://www.economist.com/news/china/21698292-chinas-leader-guards-against-nasty-foreign-influences-charity-ends-home>.

“eroding the power of...states (and usurping their sovereignty).”<sup>14</sup> The narrative that NGOs promote democratization and good governance, thereby disciplining developing countries for integration into the “international community,” recalls the “civilizing mission” of 19<sup>th</sup> century imperialism.<sup>15</sup> Thus, this narrative functions to provide implicit support for Western interventionism and imperialism. The idea that civil society promotes democratization has a family resemblance to other teleological narratives involving global economic integration, new technologies, and so forth leading to the universalization of liberal democracy, if not world peace. However appealing, or unappealing, one find might find these “daydreams of the 1990s,” they seem less credible—at least if understood as unidirectional and irreversible processes—in light of the recent uptick of theocratic, authoritarian, and popular nationalist impulses in wide varieties of political settings around the world.

This thesis explores the crucial issue of how formal and informal interactions between the state and Buddhist institutions shapes the situation of Buddhist charities in the PRC. It will consider how changes in state policy and developments within Buddhism during the reform period have interacted to shape the emergence of Buddhist charities. However, for the reasons outlined above, I will avoid relying on a model of “civil society” as distinct from, and opposed to the state, either as a descriptive model for the status of Buddhist charities, or as a normative standard for their progress or success. Instead, I will draw on the approach taken by Ashiwa and Wank in their account of the Buddhist revival in mainland China as produced by negotiations among temple leaders, the Buddhist Association, and government agencies. Following their work, I approach “state-religion nexus as actual interactions,”

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<sup>14</sup>Tina Wallace, “NGO dilemmas: Trojan horses for global neoliberalism?.” *Socialist Register* 40, no. 40 (2009), 202-219, 202. Maximilian C. Forte, “Introduction,” *Good Intentions: Norms and Practices of Imperial Humanitarianism*, (Montreal: Alert Press, 2014), 10.

<sup>15</sup>Forte, 14.

involving multiple actors with different motivations and interests.<sup>16</sup> This approach acknowledges that “religion” and “the state,” are internally differentiated aggregates of agencies, actors, and interests. The scope of possibility for religious organizations’ activities is continuously redefined through ongoing processes of interaction and negotiation among temple management, government agencies, and lay donors.

During the past decade, China’s charity sector has grown rapidly. Donations to registered charities increased from 10 billion RMB (1.5 billion USD) in 1996 to 100 billion RMB in 2016.<sup>17</sup> One form that growth in the nonprofit charity sector has taken is the founding of new charities affiliated with religious organizations. The first officially recognized religiously-affiliated charity in the PRC, Xiamen’s Nanputuo Temple Charity (*Nanputuo si cishan hui* 南普陀寺慈善会) was established in 1994. The Taiwan-based Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation (*Ciji Jijinhui* 慈济基金会, henceforth Ciji), one of the largest-scale and best-known Buddhist charities, has also been active in mainland China since the early 1990s. Within the past five years, however, the founding of Buddhist charitable associations (*cishan hui* 慈善会) and foundations (*jijin hui* 基金会) has rapidly accelerated. In Xiamen, Fujian, where the fieldwork for this project was conducted, at least four Buddhist temples have established new charitable organizations or foundations since 2011. Buddhist charities are active in a number of areas, including disaster relief, poverty alleviation, education, medical

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<sup>16</sup>Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank, “The Politics of Reviving a Buddhist Temple: State, Association, and Religion in Southeast China,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 65, no. 2 (May 2006), 338.

<sup>17</sup>Xinhua, “Charity Law to smooth China's last-mile drive to 2020 targets,” *Xinhua Net*, March 16, 2016, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-03/16/c\\_135194487.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-03/16/c_135194487.htm).

care, and care for orphans, the elderly, and the disabled. Charity and public welfare<sup>18</sup> work constitutes an emerging form of Buddhist presence and participation in mainland China's public sphere.

This project is based on in-depth interviews with staff and clerics affiliated with seven Buddhist charities in Xiamen. Interviewees described their experiences with the nonprofit registration process and state oversight of their organizations, as well as collaboration with state agencies (e.g. state agencies referring needy individuals or families to Buddhist organizations for assistance). I also interviewed staff members of organizations that serve as intermediaries between Buddhist organizations and the state—namely, the Xiamen Buddhist Association (*Xiamen shi fojiao xiehui* 厦门市佛教协会), and the Xiamen Municipal Charity Federation (*Xiamen shi cishan zonghui* 厦门市慈善总会). The Charity Federation is a GONGO (government-organized NGO) that administers many of Xiamen's Buddhist temple's charitable foundations; an employee described their relationship to Xiamen's Buddhist charities as one of “mutual supervision.”<sup>19</sup>

Based on interviews with clerics and other charity staff, this thesis, therefore, considers how the incentives, motivations, and capacities of Buddhist groups and state agencies have interacted to produce the recent charity boom. In what respects are these actors' intentions and motivations aligned, and what possibilities have been opened up by these areas of alignment? On the other hand, in what ways are state agencies and Buddhist groups not in alignment, and what constraints does this introduce? What interactions take place between

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<sup>18</sup>In this thesis, I translate 慈善 *cishan*, which is translated as “charity” or “philanthropy,” as “charity,” and 公益 *gongyi*, which I have seen variously translated as “public welfare,” “public benefit,” or “public interest,” as “public welfare.”

<sup>19</sup>“监督与被监督的关系”

state agencies and Buddhist groups in the context of charity work? Are they of a more coercive (i.e. opportunities for surveillance, co-optation, and extraction of resources) and/or of a more cooperative character (i.e. mutual legitimation, collaboration towards shared goals, and the exchange of distinctive resources, capabilities, or differently-inflected forms of charisma)? Finally, how have trends within Chinese Buddhism during the reform period interacted with policy changes to shape the current situation of Buddhist charities?

On one hand, the recent rapid growth of in numbers of officially registered Buddhist charities is to some degree, the outcome of a favorable political climate. On the other hand, it would be misguided to over-emphasize the top-down efforts of the state at the expense of overlooking the initiative and activities of Buddhist clerics, lay donors, and volunteers. For one thing, the initiative and expertise of religious organizations with regards to charity work is, in fact, a presupposition of the official, top-down discourse associated with policies promoting the growth of religious charities. According to this official discourse, religiously affiliated charitable organizations should be encouraged precisely because they have the capacity to mobilize volunteers and resources towards ends which enhance public welfare, autonomously of the state and its resources. This official discourse also recognizes the importance of religion as an inspiration for pre-modern forms of charity, and as a wellspring of the “traditional values” of compassion, benevolence, generosity, and so forth, that motivate charity work.

Xiamen’s two largest Buddhist charities began their activities in the 1990s—that is, prior to the time when obtaining official permission for charity work became politically expedient and, relatively speaking, logistically simple. Nanputuo Temple Charity forged a previously untrodden path to obtaining official recognition as a nonprofit organization in 1994,

becoming one of the first officially recognized religiously affiliated charities in mainland China. Between 1999 and 2008, when the organization finally obtained official registration at the national level, Ciji volunteers in Xiamen carried out charity projects by working directly and informally with local government officials, hospitals, and schools. Xiamen's smaller temples, prior to establishing officially registered charities or foundations, already engaged in more informal or ad hoc charitable activities, such as collecting and distributing used clothing, giving away excess food offerings, and providing free vegetarian meals to visitors. While Buddhist charities have adopted the organizational features of a nonprofit association or foundation as required for official registration, the practices of contemporary Buddhist charities also, as I will describe, share features with late imperial- and Republican-era forms of charitable organizations. This is particularly true of charities' fundraising practices, which draw on traditions of almsgiving and merit-making, as well the tradition of lay sponsorship of the merit-producing rituals provided by Buddhist clerics.

The influence of “humanistic Buddhism” (*renjian fojiao* 人间佛教)—which emphasizes a pragmatic concern with human problems over a focus on pure lands, ghosts, and the souls of the dead—is also a factor in recent developments in Buddhist charity. Both of Xiamen's most influential Buddhist charities, Nanputuo Temple Charity and Ciji, are closely identified with “humanistic Buddhism,” and can claim historical ties to its founding figure, Taixu (1890-1947). The emergence of this modernist discourse within Chinese Buddhism, in its various iterations, has been closely intertwined with processes of state formation, modernization, and social reform in both mainland China and Taiwan. During the reform period, “humanistic Buddhism” has become part of the official ideology promulgated by the Buddhist Association. Meanwhile, Taiwan-based humanistic Buddhist new religious



movements, among them the Buddhist humanitarian organization Ciji, have expanded their activities across the straits and, more recently, obtained official permission from the central government of the PRC to establish a permanent presence.

In light of these various developments, this thesis will describe how changes in state management of Buddhism in the PRC, in interaction with changes within Buddhist institutions during the reform period, have brought about the recent Buddhist charity boom. In doing so, I take an approach attuned to interaction and interpenetration among “religion,” “state,” and “civil society,” in place of an approach that treats church and state, confrontation and cooptation, and repression and freedom as too-starkly opposed pairs. This project, though based on short-term fieldwork, also brings a local and ethnographic approach to the topic of religious charities, a perspective that Yuan Tongkai and Guo Junli identified, in a 2015 review article, as lacking in the existing literature.<sup>20</sup>

In the next section of the thesis, I provide a review of existing literature on religious charities, summarizing the approaches to understanding the relationships between religion, state, and society. In the third section, I describe some of the trends affecting Buddhism in the reform period that have shaped the development of Buddhist charities. These include changes in the role of Buddhism as envisioned by the CCP; the influence of “humanistic” Buddhist organizations, and the renewal of lay sponsorship of Buddhism. Subsequent sections of the thesis will revisit and develop these themes in relation to the results of my fieldwork. By approaching the topic from these various angles, I intend, on one hand, to acknowledge the impact of changes in policy that aim to instrumentalize Buddhist charity to support social welfare and cohesion. However, I also wish to acknowledge the degree to which Buddhist charity continues to draw on logics—e.g. of almsgiving and lavish

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<sup>20</sup>Yuan Tongkai and Guo Junli, 36.

expenditure on merit-making rituals—that cannot be reduced to, and perhaps even subvert the rational-utilitarian morality promoted in the official discourse of the party-state.

## II. Literature Review: Religious Charities in the PRC

In a review of existing Chinese language research on charity in mainland China, Yuan Tongkai and Guo Junli identify the configuration of relationships among “government—religion—society” as the central issue in this literature.<sup>21</sup> The place of religious charities within this configuration, they point out, is somewhat ambiguous, as religious charities belong both to the “religious sphere” (*zongjiao jie* 宗教界) and to the “social sphere” (*shehui jie* 社会界), elsewhere called the “public sphere,” *gonggong lingyu* 公共领域).<sup>22</sup> Most academic literature on religious charities has been produced by scholars affiliated with institutions that serve a think-tank like role in informing social policy, including the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) Institute of World Religions (*Zhongguo shehui kexue yuan shijie zongjiao yanjiu suo* 中国社会科学院世界宗教研究所) and the National Religious Affairs Bureau Research Institute (*Guojia zongjiao shiwu ju yanjiu zhongxin* 国家宗教事务局研究中心). For this reason, much of this literature is concerned with evaluating the merits of religious charities with an eye to the production of public policy, or identifying the challenges facing religious charities, and offering suggestions as to how these difficulties might be resolved, whether through changes to the legal and regulatory framework governing charities, or through changes in the organizational practices of religious charities.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>“政府—宗教—社会.” Yuan and Guo, 36.

<sup>22</sup>Zheng Xiaoyun, 郑筱筠, “‘Linglei de ganga’ yu ‘boli koudai’ dangdai zongjiao cishan gongyi de ‘Zhongguo shi kunjing’”另类的尴尬”与“玻璃口袋”——当代宗教慈善公益的“中国式困境,” *Shijie zongjiao wenhua* 世界宗教文化, (2012): 52-58.

<sup>23</sup>E.g. Zhuo Xinping and Zheng Xiaoyun, eds. 卓新平,郑筱筠, *Zongjiao cishan yu shehui fazhan*, 宗教慈善与社会发展, Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe 中国社会科学出版社, 2015. See also: Cui Yueqin and Sun Yiling 崔月琴, 孙艺凌, “Zhuaxing qi zongjiao cishan fazhan de kunking ji lujing xuanze” 转型期宗教慈善发展的困境及路径选择, *Sixiang zhanxian*, 思想战线 40, no. 6 (2014) 72-77; Gong Wanda, and Liu Zuyun, 龚万达, 刘祖云, “Dangdai Zhongguo zongjiao cishan shiye fazhan: lishi yu xiandai de shenshi,” 当代

Zhang Xiaoyun, assistant director of the CASS Institute of World Religions, sees many of the difficulties facing religious charities as arising from their ambiguous position relative to “religion” and “society.” She refers to this dilemma as the “awkwardness of being uncategorizable.”<sup>24</sup> On one hand, religious charities have close ties to religious institutions, and their activities are informed by particular spiritual and doctrinal commitments. On the other hand, many religious charities accept donations from and serve people beyond a particular religious community. Zheng claims, moreover, that the “awkwardness of being uncategorizable” is a distinctly “Chinese-style dilemma,” in that it emerges from the role that China’s Maoist history has played in shaping the legal and regulatory structures pertaining to religious organizations. For example, the law allows for the restriction of religious organizations’ activities to designated religious activity sites (*zongjiao huodong changsuo* 宗教活动场所). Thus, depending on how regulations are interpreted—which is, in practice, often loosely—public-facing activities of religious charities might, strictly speaking, be seen as problematic. This may be due, for example, to concerns that religious groups might “seize the opportunity to proselytize” (*jieji chuanjiao* 借机传教) during public service activities.<sup>25</sup> Thus, even though Marxist-Leninist informed attitudes which view private charity as a form of bourgeois hypocrisy, or that seek to suppress religion, may have long ceased to exert a serious influence on policy, traces of these attitudes as retained in the legal and regulatory

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中国宗教慈善事业发展：历史与现实的审视, *Gansu shehui kexue* 甘肃社会科学, no 5. (2013), 236-9; 248; Wei Lebo 魏乐博, “Zhongguo shehui de zongjiao he gongyi” 中国社会的宗教和公益, *Beijing daxuebao* (Zhexue shehui kexue ban) 北京大学学报 (哲学社会科学版), no 4. (2009), 82-88.

<sup>24</sup>Zheng Xiaoyun, 58.

<sup>25</sup>Wang Zhenyao, 王振耀, “Zongjiao yu Zhongguo xiandai cishan zhuanxing—jianlun cibe, kuanrong, zhuanye fengxian ji yangcheng jiaoyu de jiazhi” 宗教与中国现代慈善转型——兼论慈悲, 宽容, 专业奉献及养成教育的价值. *Shijie zongjiao wenhua*, 世界宗教文化 1(2012): 38-43.

framework continue to affect, to some degree, the range of possibilities open to religious charities. In response to this concern, Zheng offers a number of recommendations for how religious charities can mitigate the “awkwardness” that clings to their ambiguous legal status. She recommends that religious charities avoid intermingling religious activities with charity activities as much as possible. Furthermore, she recommends that religious charities shore up their legitimacy by obtaining official registration as NPOs/NGOs, pursuing specialization in their service activities via the professionalization of staff, and adopting a policy of “glass pockets”—that is, maintaining high standards of financial transparency.<sup>26</sup>

English-language literature on the topic of religious charities in the PRC also focuses on questions of state, religion, and society, albeit from a different normative angle. Political scientists Susan McCarthy and André Laliberté both address, as their primary research question, whether the PRC’s religious charities have the potential to contribute to the growth of an autonomous civil society, which might, in turn, promote democratization. However, they reach somewhat different conclusions.<sup>27</sup> McCarthy interprets religious charities as engaging in a form of “subtle, non-contentious resistance” by adopting state-sanctioned structures—the non-profit, non-enterprise unit and the foundation—and “repurposing” them as vehicles for religious practice. Laliberté, however, places a greater emphasis on the degree to which charities are complicit with the party-state. He points out that Buddhist charities “closely follow the directives of the state’s social policies,” and concludes that, if anything,

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<sup>26</sup>Zheng, 52-8.

<sup>27</sup>Susan McCarthy, “Serving Society, Repurposing the State: Religious Charity and Resistance in China,” *The China Journal*, 70(2013), 43-72; Laliberté (2012), 95-117; André Laliberté, “Buddhist Charities and China's Social Policy,” *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, 158 (2012), 95-117.

Buddhist charities' efforts to promote social welfare and stability strengthen the current regime.”<sup>28</sup>

It is possible that the differences in the emphasis placed on collaboration versus resistance between the work of McCarthy and that of Laliberté is influenced by the differences in the organizations that they studied. Whereas Laliberté considers only Buddhist charities, one of McCarthy's main case studies is of the Jinde Foundation (进德基金会 *Jinde jijinhui*), a Catholic charity. In general, Buddhism enjoys a more favorable relationship with the state relative to Christianity. It is viewed as sufficiently Sinicized such that it is not suspected of being a vector of foreign influence—a specter raised by Christian and/or Western-based international NGOs. Unlike popular or folk religion, Buddhism is recognized, both from the perspective of state policy and in the general opinion of urban elites, as a legitimate religion rather than a form of backwards superstition. In some cases, charity may be a means through which folk or popular religious organizations bolster their legitimacy. In his study of the Black Dragon King Temple in Shaanxi, Adam Yuet Chau emphasizes the role of charitable projects—including a reforestation project and a free primary school—in the “politics of legitimation” surrounding the temple.<sup>29</sup> These pro-social projects shore up the status of a “popular” or “folk” religious organization that, despite having obtained official registration through the Taoist Association, might nonetheless carry an aura of superstition or illegitimacy.

Yuan and Guo point out that religious charity offers a “win-win” (*shuangying* 双赢) situation for religious organizations and the state: it provides an opportunity for religion to be

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<sup>28</sup>Laliberté, 96.

<sup>29</sup>Adam Yuet Chau, *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China*, (Stanford University Press, 2008), 235.

re-introduced into the public sphere in the PRC, while, at the same time, contributing to the diversification of organizations engaged in public welfare work.<sup>30</sup> The growth of Buddhist nonprofits offers the opportunity for Buddhist organizations to have an officially sanctioned role in the PRC's public sphere, albeit one that extends only insofar as Buddhism can be identified with virtues of altruism, social cohesion, pride in China's culture heritage, and so forth.

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<sup>30</sup>Yuan and Guo, 36.

### **III. Buddhism During the Reform Period and the Development of Buddhist Charities**

The recent growth of Buddhist charities in the PRC is overdetermined, in the sense that it could be interpreted from the point of view of any number of trends, or causal factors, operating at multiple scales. For example, at the most general scale, mainland China's Buddhist nonprofits can be understood as an example of the globalization of the NGO form. The global spread of NGOs, and the localization of NGO-like institutional forms within different political and cultural contexts, is a trend that dates to the 1980s. At a similarly global scale, Buddhist charities in the PRC can be seen as yet another instance of the renewed salience of religion to public life apparent in so many parts of the world—among them the United States, Iran, and the former USSR—during the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, surprising many social scientists who had predicted an increasingly secular world. Post-1978 reforms opened up new possibilities for religious organizations, and new possibilities for voluntary organization outside of the direct control of the state. Economic reform has produced the surplus wealth that enables private and corporate donors to give to charities and to sponsor a wide range of Buddhist institutions and activities. At the same time, the deterioration of the Maoist-era state-sponsored social safety net also contributed to some of the social problems that these charities aim to address. Reform and opening up also allowed for renewed exchange between Buddhists in mainland and those in Southeast Asian and Taiwan. This includes exchange with the Buddhist modernist new religious movements, often identified with “humanistic Buddhism,” that have become tremendously influential in Taiwan since the 1980s. The most influential of these organizations are known as the “Four Great Mountains” of Taiwanese Buddhism: Ciji, Dharma Drum Mountain (*Fagushan* 法鼓山), Buddha's Light Mountain (*Foguangshan*, 佛光山), and Chung Tai Shan (*Zhongtaishan*, 中



台山). During the 1990s, these NGO-like Taiwanese organizations became active in the mainland.

From this rather amorphous set of possible contributing influences, I will consider three factors which would appear to be particularly useful in shedding light on the current state of charities in Xiamen. They are:

- 1) recent policy changes intended to encourage the development of a private charity sector, which includes religiously-affiliated charities, in mainland China;
- 2) the influence of modernizing, humanistic forms of Buddhism mentioned earlier, most notably the NGO-like charitable foundation Ciji, which has been active on the mainland since the 1990s; and
- 3) renewed lay sponsorship of Buddhism, including not only Buddhist charity but the merit-generating ritual activities performed by Buddhist clerics, due to rising incomes and economic growth, coupled with the liberalization of religion policy in the PRC during the same time period.

In the following section, I will expand upon each of these factors, providing context for understanding the themes that I will revisit in my ethnographic account of charity in Xiamen.

#### ***A. State Discourse on Buddhism, Charity, and “Traditional Chinese Values”***

The current growth in Buddhist charities reflects a favorable—though, of course, constrained—political environment. China’s economic reforms have produced astonishing changes. There are 680 million fewer people living in extreme poverty (according to the World Bank standard of \$1.25/day) in 2010 than in 1981.<sup>31</sup> However, the dismantling of the social safety net that accompanied economic privatization has undisputedly contributed to

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<sup>31</sup>Joe C. B. Leung, and Yuebin Xu, *China’s Social Welfare: The Third Turning Point*, (Wiley, 2015).

increased inequality, and contributed to a welfare gap disproportionately affecting vulnerable groups. Layoffs from state-owned enterprises and increased rural-urban migration meant that an increasing number of urban residents lacked access to the subsidized food, housing, healthcare, education, and social security benefits provided through the work units (*danwei* 单位) that provided all such services during the Mao era. Partially-funded retirement accounts and fee-based medical care replaced more comprehensive social programs. Fiscal decentralization led to regional inequalities in delivery of social services. Decentralization also reduced local governments' ability to secure funds from Beijing or provincial governments to provide social services in rural areas. Since the 1990s, the CCP has experimented in various ways to encourage the privatization of social services, though not at the cost of ceding social control to the non-state sector. As Robert Weller has pointed out, “the political results so far bear little resemblance to neoliberal visions of the appropriate role for the state.”<sup>32</sup>

In 1992, at the First National Congress on the Management of Social Organizations, a state councilor suggested that “small government, big society” would be a trend in political reform.<sup>33</sup> Policymakers argued that the socialist market economy required a new form of social administration, in which social organizations (*shehui tuanti* 社会团体) played a greater role. Proponents of this approach “argued that social organizations should be given more autonomy, to achieve the ‘three selves’ (*sanzi* 三自) —self-governance, self-management, and self-support (*zizhu, zili, zili* 自主, 自理, 自立) —in order to become truly

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<sup>32</sup>Weller, “Civil associations and autonomy,” 77.

<sup>33</sup>Kin-Man Chan, “The development of NGOs under a post-totalitarian regime: the case of China,” in Weller, *Civil Life, Globalization and Political Change in Asia: Organizing between Family and State*, 20-41; 22.

non-governmental.”<sup>34</sup> In 1998, during the first meeting of the Ninth National People’s Congress, a milestone in China’s reforms, Zhu Rongji announced the plan to “cut the size of the government” and encourage the growth of “intermediate social organizations.”<sup>35</sup> He proposed that “a social structure to mediate between individuals and the state resembling NGOs, should be promoted to enhance the development of market socialism.”<sup>36</sup>

Nonetheless, the Provisional Regulation on the Registration and Management of Mass Nonenterprise Units, which was promulgated in 1998, included provisions that imposed significant constraints on the registration of nonprofit organizations, and that ultimately had the effect of curbing the growth of the NGO sector.<sup>37</sup> For one thing, the 1998 regulation stipulates that only one social organization of any particular kind is allowed to register within a given administrative region. The 1998 policy also mandated the practice of “dual supervision,” in which each organization must find a relevant state unit (government department or official social organization) to act as its “business supervisory unit” (*yewu zhuguan danwei* 业务主管单位), as well as register with the civil affairs departments at different administrative levels (county, township, etc.). The supervisory unit is then responsible for auditing the organization’s activities and finances, a burden that, in most situations, tended to discourage government units from sponsoring registration applications.

Leung and Xu describe China’s current approach to social welfare by claiming that China has, “in a loose sense, as an ideal typical category, adopted some of the features of the East

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<sup>34</sup>Chan, 22-23.

<sup>35</sup>Chan, 23.

<sup>36</sup>Chan, 23.

<sup>37</sup>Chan, 25.

Asian welfare regime” pioneered by South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore.<sup>38</sup> The “East Asian welfare model” is defined by the characteristics of “low social spending, strong occupational welfare, limited government intervention, a low redistributive function, and the subordination of social policy to economic growth.”<sup>39</sup> During the 1990s, the flourishing of East Asian economies led to a search for the “secrets” of East Asian success. The “East Asian welfare model” was widely celebrated by political scientists and politicians, both within Asia and the West, because of East Asian states’ abilities to maintain low welfare expenditures while achieving good social welfare outcomes, measured, for example, in terms of public health and educational achievement. In particular, the East Asian welfare model was touted as an alternative model to Western European welfare states, which, in the 1990s, were perceived as experiencing mounting social problems despite high levels of welfare expenditure. For example, in Britain, the “New Labor Party has seen East Asia as instructive in its emphasis on the role of the government in simultaneously stimulating economic growth, maintaining social cohesion, and raising popular welfare standards.” Meanwhile, British conservatives have “cited it in support of an image of an enterprise society based on low levels of government expenditure and a spirit of individual self-reliance which avoids dependence on government.”<sup>40</sup>

In the 1990s, a common narrative concerning East Asian developmental states located the reasons for their success in their shared culture heritage. In particular, Confucianism, at one time seen as a conservative force constraining economic progress, was re-assessed.

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<sup>38</sup>Leung and Xu, 11.

<sup>39</sup>Leung and Xu, 11.

<sup>40</sup>Gordon White and Roger Goodman, “Welfare orientalism and the search for an East Asian welfare model,” *The East Asian welfare model: welfare orientalism and the state*, ed. Roger Goodman, Gordon White, and Huck-ju Kwon, (London: Routledge, 1998), 3.

Confucianism's "emphasis on education, strong family relations, benevolent paternalism, social harmony and discipline, respect for tradition, and a strong work ethic" are now cited as reasons for East Asian success.<sup>41</sup> Catherine Jones, for example, praises the "leaner" and "more family/community based" approaches of what she calls "Confucian welfare systems," ultimately asking "Why not a variant of Confucianism for Europe?"<sup>42</sup> Politicians have also justified their welfare policies by alluding to "Asian values":

Part of Lee Kwan Yew's notion of 'Asian values' ... is the idea that Western-style welfare states are not only economically too expensive but culturally inappropriate in that they foster laziness and dependency. These problems are rooted in the Western ideology of individual rights; Eastern welfare systems work better because they rest on strong community and family values which are strengthened, not weakened, by state action.<sup>43</sup>

Similar arguments were also adopted up by welfare reformers within China during the 1990s. These scholars "sought to build a negative stereotype of *le malaise anglais* and the 'Western welfare state' as financially wasteful, socially corrosive, and economically irrational."<sup>44</sup> By way of contrast, these reformers praise the effects of "Asian traditional values," stressing "the welfare role of the family, the role of private philanthropy, and the avoidance of dependence on the state."<sup>45</sup>

White and Goodman have coined the term "welfare Orientalism" to describe these cultural explanations of the "East Asian welfare state." Unlike the "negative Orientalism" described by Said, this discourse tends to depict East Asian culture as a source of success and

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<sup>41</sup>White and Goodman, 8.

<sup>42</sup>Catherine Jones, "The pacific challenge: Confucian welfare states," in *New Perspectives on the Welfare State in Europe*, Catherine Jones, ed, (London: Routledge, 1993), 198-217, 215, cited in White and Goodman, 12.

<sup>43</sup>White and Goodman, 11.

<sup>44</sup>White and Goodman, 11-12.

<sup>45</sup>White and Goodman, 12.

worthy of emulation. Nonetheless, these accounts are essentialist in that they understand East Asian societies and cultures as imbued with timeless traits; they share the analytic weaknesses of 19<sup>th</sup> century Orientalism insofar as they explain complex social phenomena as expressions of a few static, essential traits.<sup>46</sup> Leung and Xu, among other political scientists, question whether the welfare systems of South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore have enough structural similarities for the category of the “East Asian welfare state” to be analytically useful. Regardless of the validity of the category of the “East Asian welfare state,” however, “welfare Orientalism” has taken on a life of its own. For better or worse, arguments that can be genealogically traced to the discourse of “welfare orientalism” are used prescriptively—in order to recommend or justify certain policy decisions—as much as descriptively. In particular, the negative depiction of Western-style welfare states as incompatible with East Asian values serves to legitimize low welfare expenditures by the state and stave off demands for more comprehensive national welfare programs.

During the 1990s, PRC policy tended to subordinate concerns related to social inequality to the pursuit of economic growth. More recently, however, economic growth in the PRC has led to escalating expectations for social welfare provision, and there is a growing consensus that increased social welfare provision is important to maintaining social stability and the legitimacy of the CCP.<sup>47</sup> According to Leung and Xu, the period from 2002-2006 represents a major “turning point” in which, as the pace of economic growth inevitably slowed, central leadership began to place a greater emphasis on sustainable development, “inclusive growth,” and social cohesion. This shift is reflected in the CCP slogans which have debuted in the 21st century, including the promotion of a “harmonious society” (和谐社会 *hexie*

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<sup>46</sup>White and Goodman, 12.

<sup>47</sup>Leung and Xu, 5.

*shehui*) and the more recent “Chinese dream” (中国梦 *Zhongguo meng*), which reinforce this message of inclusive growth.

At the Third Plenum of the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, China’s attempt to “rebalance responsibility between public, private, non-profit, and informal sectors” was a significant topic of discussion; central and local governments are actively encouraging the development of private charities.<sup>48</sup> In March of 2012, a number of state agencies—including the China State Administration of Religious Affairs, the United Front Work Department of the CCP Central Committee, the National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the Taxation Bureau, as well as other organizations—jointly published a document titled “Opinions on Encouraging and Regulating Religious Entities to Engage in Charitable Activities” (“Guanyu guli he guifan zongjiaojie congshi gong cishan huodong de yijian,” 《关于鼓励和规范宗教界从事公益慈善活动的意见》).<sup>49</sup> This document notes that religious organizations are well positioned to contribute to social welfare thanks to “deep faith foundations, rich historical traditions, and relatively higher social credibility.” It urges charities to pursue transparency and focus on “standardized scientific operation and improving management.” The recommendations reaffirm that religious charities are eligible for tax benefits, and that donations to religious charities are tax-exempt. The document establishes that the Religious Affairs Bureau, at all administrative levels, may act as a “business supervisory unit” to oversee charities’ finances, a provision intended to alleviate religious charities’ difficulties with registration.

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<sup>48</sup>Leung and Xu, 178.

<sup>49</sup> “Religious Organizations Can Establish Foundations, Social Welfare Organizations, and Nonprofit Hospitals in Accordance with the Law,” *China Development Brief*, March 21, 2012, <http://chinadevelopmentbrief.cn/news/religious-organizations-can-establish-foundations-social-welfare-organizations-and-nonprofit-hospitals-in-accordance-wth-the-law/>

More recently, in March of 2016, the National People’s Congress (NPC) approved a landmark charity law intended to stimulate the growth of the private charity sector. This law simplifies the registration process for charities, most notably eliminating the burdensome “dual registration” requirement. It also clarifies the tax benefits associated with charitable donations, creating stronger tax incentives for making charitable donations.<sup>50</sup>

Recent policy changes have been accompanied by an emerging official discourse (in both government and academic sources) calling for the nation to develop a “culture of charity” (*cishan wenhua* 慈善文化). This phrase appears in the 2016 Charity Law, where “promoting a culture of charity” (*hongyang cishan wenhua* 弘扬慈善文化) is specified as one of the purposes of the law. According to this official discourse, the “religious sphere” has the capacity to influence public opinion, to make the public more aware of charity, assist the charity sector in developing a good reputation (i.e. in light of scandals involving secular charities), and to promote a “culture of charity.”<sup>51</sup> Religious organizations are not just thought to be able to mobilize volunteers and resources towards charity work—in fact, they are understood, in this discourse, as having a privileged capacity to inculcate charitable values, win hearts and minds for charity work, and shape public opinion.

The timing of the 2012 directive encouraging religious charity is also significant in that it followed a series of very public scandals involving nonprofits, collectively referred to as a

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<sup>50</sup> Zhonghua renmin gongheguo cishan fa 中华人民共和国慈善法 [Charity Law of the People’s Republic of China] (promulgated by the National People’s Congress), May 3, 2016, Chairman’s Order 12th Congress No. 43, [http://www.npc.gov.cn/npc/dbdhhhy/12\\_4/2016-03/21/content\\_1985714.htm](http://www.npc.gov.cn/npc/dbdhhhy/12_4/2016-03/21/content_1985714.htm). Unofficial English translation, crowd-sourced from volunteers, available at “2016 Charity Law,” *China Law Translate*, May 3, 2016, <http://www.chinalawtranslate.com/2016charitylaw/?lang=en>.



“charity storm” or “crisis” (*cishan fengbo* 慈善风波).<sup>52</sup> The document calls out “relatively high levels of public trust” (*jiaogao de shehui gongxin du* 较高的社会公信度) as one of the resources possessed by religious organizations that are conducive to charity work.<sup>53</sup>

Furthermore, scandals noted earlier implicating the Red Cross, a GONGO sponsored and partially funded by the government, also provided ammunition for advocates of a diversified charity sector that includes more privately funded charities. According to Hu Xingdou, an economics professor at the Beijing Institute of Technology, “The intended effects of donations are compromised when the Red Cross buys things at higher prices, because with backing from the State, it is less sensitive to cost concerns and public accountability.”<sup>54</sup> Private charities, he claims, are more likely to behave responsibly because they are more dependent on, and therefore responsive to, public opinion.

The discourse promoting a “culture of charity” often appear in conjunction with a concurrent discourse celebrating “traditional Chinese culture” (*Zhongguo chuantong wenhua* 中国传统文化), along with traditional Chinese “virtues” (*meide* 美德), “values” (*jiazhi* 价值) or “morals” (*daode* 道德). In official (both policy and scholarly) discourse, it is commonplace to assert that a “culture of charity” (*cishan wenhua* 慈善文化) ought to be rooted in charitable traditions and values unique to China. For example, the meeting of the 2016 China Charity Culture Forum (*Zhongguo cishan wenhua luntan* 中国慈善文化论坛),

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<sup>52</sup>See, for example, Edward Wong, “An Online Scandal Underscores Chinese Distrust of State Charities,” *New York Times*, July 3, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/04/world/asia/04china.html>; “Charity accused over land deal, loans,” *China Daily*, September 5, 2011, <http://english.cntv.cn/20110905/101953.shtml>; Xin Zhiming, “Red Cross Scandal,” June 28, 2011, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2014-08/07/content\\_18265643.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2014-08/07/content_18265643.htm).

<sup>53</sup>Chen Qi, 陈琪, “Zongjiao jigou ke yifa ban jijinhui huo yiyuan,” 宗教机构可依法办基金会或医院 *Caixin wang*, 财新网 February 2, 2012, [china.caixin.com/2012-02-27/100360900.html](http://china.caixin.com/2012-02-27/100360900.html).

sponsored by the GONGO (government-organized NGO) China Charity Alliance, focused on the theme of “Extending China’s Charitable Road” (*Jietong Zhongguo shandao* 接通中国善道) by combining “traditional culture” (*chantong wenhua* 传统文化) with “international ideals” (*guoji linian* 国际理念) (See Figure 1).<sup>55</sup>



**Figure 1. The theme of the 2016 China Charity Culture forum was “Extending China’s Charitable Road” by building on forms of charity rooted in “traditional culture.”<sup>56</sup>**

This discourse identifies Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism as sources of “traditional charity culture.” Indeed, while perhaps not regarded as favorably as Confucianism, according to this current discourse, Buddhism has a relatively privileged status. Unlike many forms of Chinese religiosity, Buddhism is widely perceived by urban elites as a legitimate religion rather than a backward form of popular superstition. And, unlike Christianity, Buddhism is not associated with a painful history of imperialism.

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<sup>55</sup>Tang, Guijiang 唐贵江, “Ye nei changtan goujian cishan wenhua tixi : chuantong wenhua + guoji linian” 业内畅谈构建慈善文化体系：传统文化+国际理念, *Zhongguo xinwen wang* 中国新闻网, September 24, 2009, <http://www.chinanews.com/sh/2016/09-24/8013717.shtml>.

<sup>56</sup> Tang Guijiang.

Furthermore, Buddhism is viewed as sufficiently Sinicized such that it is not suspected of being a vector of foreign influence—a specter raised by Christian or Western-based international NGOs.

The emphasis on a “traditional Chinese culture” and values provides a potential “opening” of sorts for Buddhism. Certainly, there are indications that some Buddhist organizations are choosing to embrace it as such. In a 2014 speech at the UNESCO headquarters, Xi Jinping praised the contributions made by Confucianism, Daoism, and what he termed “Buddhism with Chinese characteristics” to Chinese civilization. Soon after, an article in *The Voice of Dharma* (Fayin 法音) claimed that Buddhists in Hangzhou had been “earnestly studying and disseminating” Xi’s “extremely clear and penetrating” analysis of the situation of Buddhism in China. They interpreted his remarks as communicating “the ardent hopes that the Party and government have for Buddhism in this historical period.”<sup>57</sup>

Since the “third turning point” described by Leung and Xu—that is, the 2002-2006 period in which the central government’s policy and rhetoric increasingly emphasized sustainable growth and social cohesion—there has been an increased emphasis on “Chineseness” and the need to carry on the positive traditions of Chinese culture in CCP messaging. This may reflect an increased confidence in Chinese culture, reflecting China’s position of strength in the international political and economic arenas. Also, a nationalist emphasis on Chineseness and traditional Chinese values in CCP discourse may serve to elide apparent contradictions between the Maoist past, the first decades of the reform period, and current policy objectives

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<sup>57</sup>She Jiatang 佘嘉堂, Changzhou shi fojiao jie xuexi Xi Jinping zhongyao jianghua bing zhicheng daxing xuanchuan 常州市佛教界学习习近平重要讲话并制成大型宣传, *Fayin* 4 (2014), <http://www.cqvip.com/qk/81958x/201404/49569740.html>.

(See Figure 3).<sup>58</sup> After all, each of these historical eras has been transformative in the life experiences of so many people, and at each of these moments, the CCP has played a decisive role. For instance, a recent public service advertisement, part of a series associated with the “Chinese dream” and “Emphasize civilization, cultivated new customs” (*Jiang wenming, shu xinfeng* 讲文明，树新风) campaigns, quotes the 1943 revolutionary song, “Without the Communist Party, there would be no new China” (See Figure 4). Another reads, “Why is China strong? Because it has the Communist Party” (See Figure 5). Another theme of advertisements promoting patriotism is to highlight the connection between the well being of the family or the individual and that of the nation (See Figure 6).

During the summer of 2014, when I conducted fieldwork in Xiamen, advertisements belonging to this series, all illustrated in a bright, folk art style, were ubiquitous at bus stops, on the fencing surrounding construction sites, and hung as posters in office buildings. Many of the advertisements were on the theme of promoting Chinese values, such as filial piety (See Figure 7 and 8). Other advertisements promote frugality and hard work. As in the “American dream,” the motif that hard work will lead to prosperity is a major theme in the “Chinese dream” campaign. One advertisement quotes a 1939 speech given in Yunnan by Mao Zedong: “Work with your own hands; you will have ample food and clothing.” The series also featured advertisements promoting volunteer work and making charitable donation (See Figures 11-12). Though it is likely that my research topic primed me to selectively attend to particular, related, themes, I was struck by the consonance between the omnipresent state sponsored public service announcements that I passively consumed and the

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<sup>58</sup> All of the public service advertisements included in this thesis can be found on the *Zhongguo Jingsheng Wengming Wang Wangzhan* 中国精神文明网网站 [Chinese Spiritual Civilization Network Website], the website of the Central Civilization Office of the Central Propaganda Department 中央宣传部、中央文明办 *Zhongyang xuanquan bu, Zhongyang wenming ban*, <http://www.wenming.cn>.

topic of my research. Messages promoting volunteer work and charitable giving, messages promoting Chinese values, and various combinations of these themes were ubiquitous during the period in which I was conducting my fieldwork in Xiamen. Each time the public bus stopped, a recording would play reminding the listener of a list of the “traditional virtues of the Chinese people” before asking passengers to give up their seats to those who needed them. Everyman revolutionary hero Lei Feng, celebrated up as a model of selflessness and modesty in Mao-era propaganda campaigns, has been re-invented as a symbol of volunteerism. His image, with his signature earflap hat, is ubiquitous—appearing on posters and plaques in the offices of temple charities, and on banners at temple charity events (See Figure 13).

The CCP’s emphasis on the moral education and transformation of the Chinese people, resonates with pre-modern regimes. The CCP could be seen as drawing on a paternalistic, Confucian tradition of civilizing education or *jiaohua* (教化), adapted to the contemporary media environment. Recent messaging could be interpreted as drawing inspiration from the 1990s discourse “welfare orientalism,” deploying this discourse as a policy template. If “traditional Asian values” ensure good social outcomes at a low cost, then re-enforcing or inculcating traditional Chinese values can contribute to favorable social outcomes.

The message that “traditional Chinese values” and “traditional Chinese culture,” including Buddhism, is compatible with a “culture of charity” also serves to counteract earlier messages tinged with “negative orientalism.” For example, the low rates of charitable donation in China, at least if measured by percentage of income donated to officially registered nonprofits, has been attributed to a Confucian tendency to be generous within





Figures 7-8. Advertisements promoting traditional Chinese values. Left: “A Chinese virtue: filial piety.” Right: “A Chinese tradition: The older brother is gentle, the younger brother humble.”

讲文明树新风 公益广告

中国精神 中国形象 中国文化 中国表达

# 自己动手 丰衣足食

缝新衣

中国网络电视台制 广东龙门 谭池发作

讲文明树新风 公益广告

中国精神 中国形象 中国文化 中国表达

# 勤劳人家 吉祥满天

中国网络电视台制 陕西户县 任宝忠作

# 勤劳 吉祥

讲文明树新风

Figures 9-10. Advertisements promoting hard work and self-reliance. Left: “Work with your own hands, and you will have ample food and clothing”; Right: “A hard working household—its blessings will fill the heavens.”





Figures 11-12. Advertisements promoting charitable giving. Left: A young girl kneels in the center of candles arranged in a heart shape, a motif used in memorials for the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, captioned, “Everyone contribute a little love”; At right, boys place gold coins into a pot labeled “Loving heart”; the caption reads “Benevolence.”



**Figure 13. In a ceremony held on the grounds of Fantian Temple, representatives of various charities, including Fantian Temple’s Hou Xue Charitable Association, receive plaques designating their organizations “Learning from Lei Feng Volunteer Service Work Sites.”<sup>59</sup>**

kinship networks, but to not feel a sense of responsibility to those outside of kinship networks.<sup>60</sup> And, China’s indigenous religious traditions, including Buddhism, have been subjected to critique (stemming in part from the polemical attacks of Protestant missionaries) as preoccupied with useless and self-interested rituals but indifferent to the well being of living people. Rather than dwelling on the ways in which Chinese culture has been depicted as incompatible with public-spirited behavior, or signaling the need to combat social anomie or a post-Maoist “moral vacuum,” recent public service campaigns offer a positive celebration of Chinese values.

<sup>59</sup>“Hou Xue cishanhui bei shouyu ‘Xue Lei Feng zhiyuan fuwu gongzuo zhan’ paibian” 厚学慈善会被授予“学雷锋志愿服务工作站”牌匾, Xiamen fojiao zaixian 厦门佛教在线, May 11, 2013, <http://www.xmfj.org/html/w/201303/8977.html>.

<sup>60</sup>Leung and Xu.

This positive approach to messaging is notably more sophisticated from the point of view of experimental results from the field of social psychology.<sup>61</sup> Experiments have shown that a common tactic in public service announcements, attempting to induce a sense of urgency by communicating that an undesirable behavior is sadly widespread, is misguided. Messages claiming, for example, that “alcohol and drug use is intolerably high, that adolescent suicide rates are alarming, and...that rampant polluters are spoiling the environment” may, in fact, backfire and increase the behavior they are intended to prevent.<sup>62</sup> According this is because even though they depict a certain behavior as undesirable, they also convey, as a subtext, that the behavior is socially widespread, thereby normalizing the behavior. According to this body of research, messaging is most effective in influencing behavior when it depicts descriptive norms (“what people typically do”) and injunctive norms (“what people typically approve or disapprove”) as aligned.<sup>63</sup> Along these lines, recent public service messages related to charity in contemporary China depict charity as compatible with existing, widely held, values in Chinese culture, rather than implying that there is a dire need for social change.

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<sup>61</sup>e.g. Robert B. Cialdini, “Crafting Normative Messages to Protect the Environment,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 12, no. 4 (2003), 105-109.

<sup>62</sup>Cialdini, 105.

<sup>63</sup>Cialdini, 105.



Figure 14-15. At left, “China’s little ones have big hearts”; At right, “The kind Chinese people.” The image refers to the custom, in Wuyang county in Henan Province, of celebrating the “the ants’ birthday” or the “ant festival” on the 6<sup>th</sup> day of the 6<sup>th</sup> month of the lunar calendar. Crispy cakes with sesame are prepared on this day. The crumbs that fall from the crispy cakes when they break fall on the ground and are carried away by ants.

To summarize, recent policy changes intended to stimulate the development of China’s private charity sector have coincided with the circulation of an official (political and scholarly) discourse calling for the propagation of a “culture of charity.” This “culture of charity” ought to build on “traditional Chinese values,” continuing the charitable traditions embedded in Chinese culture. Buddhism has a place within this discourse as a valued form of “traditional Chinese culture” and a wellspring of “traditional Chinese values.” Thus, efforts to build a “culture of charity” seem to present an officially-sanctioned opportunity for

Buddhism to be represented in public discourse, and for Buddhist organizations to take on a public-facing role in dispensing charitable aid.

Describing the ambiguous position of religious charities between the “religious sphere” and the public or “social” sphere, Zheng Xiaoyun writes: “Although religious charitable organizations have ties to a particular religious group, they also have clear differences [from these religious groups]; though they are supported by an existing religious faith, they may not excessively foreground their religious faith, and ought even to transcend (or “go beyond”; *chaoyue* 超越) their religious faith.”<sup>64</sup> On one hand, this quote could be interpreted as recommending that religious charities draw financial support from, and engage in activities outside of, their community of co-religionists, broadening their circle of engagement to include the general public. On the other hand, it also ambiguously treats religious faith as something to be transcended or “gotten beyond.” Thus, is possible that the public representation of Buddhism under the auspices of “charity” and “traditional Chinese culture” might come at a cost that would be seen as unacceptable by some Buddhists, i.e., those who are troubled about the instrumentalization of Buddhism to serve social policy goals, and/or its potential secularizing influence. That being said, even those Buddhists who tend towards disapproval of Buddhist organizations hobnobbing with secular authorities may find Buddhist institutions partnering with the state in promoting charity work less objectionable than previous modes of collaboration, such as developing temples as profitable tourist sites or a draw for foreign investment.

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<sup>64</sup>“这就使宗教慈善组织既与特定宗教的团体有关联，又与之有明显的区别；既有宗教信仰的依托，又不能过分凸显其宗教信仰，甚至要超越其宗教信仰”；Zheng, 52.

## ***B. Humanistic Buddhism***

Any account of Buddhist charity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century must take into account the impact of those organizations identified with “humanistic Buddhism” (*renjian fojiao* 人间佛教) that espouse charity work as central to their missions. This is especially the case with regards to charities in Xiamen. Xiamen has a unique historical connection to the origins of humanistic Buddhism. Also, thanks to its geographic location, Xiamen continues to be a particularly important site for cultural exchange with Taiwan, where humanistic Buddhism continued to develop, and in fact flourished, after 1949.

Of the Buddhist charities active in Xiamen, the two largest-scale and most influential organizations, Nanputuo Temple Charity and Ciji, are historically linked to the emergence of modernizing humanistic forms of Buddhism. Buddhist reformer Taixu served as abbot of Nanputuo Temple and director of the Minnan Buddhist Academy from 1927 to 1938. While he was at Nanputuo, he advocated an approach to Buddhism practice that he called “Buddhism for human life” (*rensheng fojiao* 人生佛教), which would later become more widely known as “Buddhism for the human realm” (*renjian fojiao* 人间佛教) or “humanistic Buddhism.” In the turbulent context of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Taixu called for a Buddhism that addressed human problems in place of what he saw as an excessive preoccupation with buddhas, pure lands, and the spirits of the dead. Taixu disapproved of the reputation of Buddhist clerics as primarily specialists in rituals for the salvation of the dead. Instead, he advocated modern monastic education that would train Buddhist clerics in reading Buddhist scripture, so that they would be trained to expound the correct dharma (*zhengfa* 正法) to lay people, rather than exclusively performing rituals. Taixu’s reformed Buddhism was “text-

based, ethical, socially engaged” and “humanist.”<sup>65</sup> In many ways it resembles liberal Protestantism.<sup>66</sup> In fact, this similarity has perhaps made Taixu an attractive or familiar figure for people from liberal Protestant backgrounds, hence his prominence in Western scholars’ accounts of Chinese Buddhism.

Taixu argued that Buddhism should be focused on resolving concrete human problems. Rather than retreating from worldly affairs, Buddhist clerics should play an active, even activist, role in China’s nation-building project. In 1908, under the influence of figures such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qiqiao, he became a “self-described ‘revolutionary monk’” determined to “save Chinese society through social reform.”<sup>67</sup> Taixu re-envisioned the pure lands of Buddhist cosmology in this-worldly terms. Indeed, he claimed that the world could be transformed into a pure land through human agency:

The building of pure lands...is not accomplished by Nature; neither are these lands created by gods. Pure lands have come into being from minds of goodness which have arisen in human and other sentient beings...If today, based on book knowledge of our minds, we can produce pure thoughts and work hard to accomplish good deeds, how hard can it be to transform an impure China into a pure land?<sup>68</sup>

During the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the overt commercialism of Buddhist rites for the dead and the intermingling of Buddhism with folk religious elements – such that these rituals’ relationship to Buddhist doctrine was unclear – met with disapproval from elite Buddhists.<sup>69</sup> They disapproved of Buddhism’s reputation as focusing more on the salvation

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<sup>65</sup>Hwee-San Tan, “Saving the Soul in Red China: Music and Ideology in the ‘Gongde’ Ritual of Merit in Fujian,” *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 11, No 1 (2002):119-140; 136.

<sup>66</sup>Tan, 136.

<sup>67</sup>Vincent Goossaert and David A Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 82.

<sup>68</sup>Don A. Pittman, *Toward a Modern Chinese Buddhism* (Honolulu: Hawai’i University Press, 2001), 224.

<sup>69</sup>Tan,136.

of the dead than the needs of the living. The commercialism of Buddhist rites for the dead was seen as a cause of the moral decline of the clergy. In 1920s Fujian, “eminent monks including Zhuanfeng and Huiquan lamented that Buddhism had assimilated too many popular practices. They not only voiced their disapproval, but took steps to discourage the practice of performing death rituals.”<sup>70</sup>

In part, elite Buddhists’ plans to reform Buddhism represent a response to polemics leveled against Chinese Buddhism by Protestant missionaries. Missionaries used Buddhists’ reputation as specialists in rites for the dead as an analogy for what they claimed was the moribund state of Buddhism itself, which they depicted as dragged down by the weight of meaningless rituals. In the writings of Protestant missionaries, “ritual was consistently described as useless, degraded, empty and ridiculous...China was perceived as uniquely engulfed in ritual.”<sup>71</sup> Protestant missionaries’ polemics against Chinese Buddhism drew from older anti-Catholic polemics. Missionaries repurposed attacks on Catholicism as superstitious and overly ritualistic as criticisms of Chinese Buddhism. This criticism also rehearses orientalist tropes of the West (and its religion) as proactive, vigorous and life-affirming, and the orient as stagnant, passive, and fatalistic.

Missionary polemics against Buddhism likely gained strength and credibility from their resonance with earlier, Confucian anti-clerical discourses. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century and before, orthodox Confucians sporadically voiced disapproval of Buddhist institutions’ diversion of resources from agricultural production to unproductive expenditures. When

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<sup>70</sup>Tan,136.

<sup>71</sup>Reinders, 2004, 96, quoted in Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, introduction to *Chinese Religiosities: Afflictions of Modernity and State Formation*, ed. Mayfair Mei-hui Yang (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 14.



funds were scarce, Confucian officials resented Buddhist temples' exemption from taxes and clerics' exemption from corvee labor. Some anti-clerical discourses affirmed the value of Buddhist and Daoist doctrines, but criticized "monasteries and professional clerics living off liturgical services."<sup>72</sup> Monks and nuns were accused of having questionable, if not depraved, lifestyles and were often criticized as having a negative moral and intellectual influence on society in general. The imperial government also played a role in regulating religion and restricting those practices it viewed as wasteful or extreme. It condemned certain popular religious practices associated with deity cults as *yinsi* 淫祀, that is, lascivious or excessive. It also restricted those practices viewed as "causing financial and emotional excesses and eventually bearing no benediction (*fu* 福) but only harm."<sup>73</sup>

Anti-superstition and anti-ritualism have shaped Chinese state policies towards religion throughout the 20th century. Under intense pressure to resist colonial encroachment, China's nationalist elites came to embrace discourses of "Enlightenment, social evolutionism, Protestantism, and scientific atheism" imported from the West.<sup>74</sup> Anything that did not conform to the category of religion, for which Protestantism was taken as an implicit model, was targeted as a "superstition" incompatible with modernity. This distinction was substantiated in policy when, in 1912, the bureau responsible for religious affairs within the Republican government expressed an intention to "reform (*gailang* 改良) existing religions so that they might contribute to social progress."<sup>75</sup> Though the direct influence of this document may have been limited, as it was produced in "situation of political chaos in which

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<sup>72</sup>Goossaert and Palmer, 36.

<sup>73</sup>Goossaert and Palmer, 30.

<sup>74</sup>Yang, introduction to *Chinese Religiosities*, 14.

<sup>75</sup>Goossaert and Palmer, 58.

leaders and ideas came and went in rapid succession,” Goossaert and Palmer nonetheless argue convincingly that it encapsulates the “modern Chinese state’s fundamental positions in matters of religious policies,” which remained roughly the same throughout most of the 20th century: “the state was ready to recognize ‘religions’ as doctrinal, spiritual, and ethical systems with a social organization, but only if they got rid of ‘superstition,’ including most of their ritual.”<sup>76</sup>

Since then, Goossaert and Palmer claim that for the most part, “The Chinese state’s attitude has been quite pragmatic: a religion was recognized if it could prove it was ‘pure’ (spiritual and ethical and natural) and well organized (hence the national associations) as well as useful (patriotic and contributing to social welfare and progress).” Furthermore, “social action in the field of education and charity” was “the most visible manifestation of the Christian-liberal normative model of a good religion [promoting] social action in the field of education and charity.”<sup>77</sup>

Taixu’s reforms reflect a historical context in which reformers, acutely aware of China’s precarious political situation, demanded that religion be rational, ethical, and socially useful to serve the needs of the time. During his lifetime, Taixu was relatively well known among intellectuals, though his tendency to propose grandiose projects—he attempted to organize a worldwide Buddhist movement that would bring about world peace—made him the target of some mockery.<sup>78</sup> Among ordinary clerics and the general public, his prestige did not match that of the famous meditation masters who were his contemporaries, such as Yuanying

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<sup>76</sup>Goossaert and Palmer, 58.

<sup>77</sup>Goossaert and Palmer, 58.

<sup>78</sup>Goossaert and Palmer, 58.

圆瑛 (1878-1953), Xuyun 虚云 (1840?-1959), or Hongyi 弘一 (1880-1942). Taixu himself was disappointed in the outcome of his efforts for reform—he even wrote an essay called “The History of My Failed Buddhist Revolution” (“Wo de fojiao geming shibai shi,” 我的佛教革命失败史). Since his death, however, Taixu’s vision for modern Buddhism has proven to have a lasting influence.

During the Maoist period, Taixu’s thought could not be directly invoked as an inspiration because of his involvement in Republican-era politics and his close association with the KMT.<sup>79</sup> However, Ji Zhe has argued convincingly that Zhao Puchu 赵朴初 (1907-2000), the longtime president of the CCP-supported Buddhist Association of China (BAC), made many thinly-veiled borrowings from Taixu’s thought, re-purposing concepts inspired by Taixu’s writings to build a case for the compatibility of Buddhism with the goals of the CCP. Frequently, Zhao Puchu argued that the Buddhist concept of a “pure land on earth,” could be envisioned as a socialist utopia, thereby building a case for the compatibility of Buddhism with the social vision of the PRC. In 1983, Zhao Puchu wrote a piece titled “Carry on the Superiority of Renjian Buddhism.”<sup>80</sup> This was the first appearance of this phrase in the official discourse of the BAC. However, he did not, at this point, mention Taixu by name, instead only making a vague reference to “forerunners” (*qianren* 前人). During the 1980s, as the relationship with Taiwan and the KMT became less antagonistic, Zhao Puchu began to reference Taixu more explicitly, and even to overtly depict himself as a spiritual successor of Taixu. The phrase “humanistic Buddhism” began to appear frequently in official BAC discourse and publications and, since 1987, has been part of the official constitution of the

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<sup>79</sup>Ji Zhe, “Zhao Puchu and His Renjian Buddhism,” *The Eastern Buddhist* 44, 2(2013): 35-58.

<sup>80</sup>Ji Zhe, 40.

BAC.<sup>81</sup> Thus, “[r]enjian Buddhism has become the official Buddhist ideology in China today.”<sup>82</sup>

Taixu’s student Yin Shun 印顺 (1906-2005) is his most important successor and the most influential interpreter of Taixu’s legacy. However, there are also areas of divergence between the two. Taixu’s “Buddhism for human life” was intended to counteract the image of Buddhism as largely a provider of funeral rites and ceremonies for the spirits of the dead. Yin Shun, however, took what he considered “a step further” and called for a Buddhism without the veneration of deities and heavenly beings.<sup>83</sup> Yin Shun wrote: “I continued the idea of Master Taixu of a Buddhism of Human Life that is free of ghosts and demons (*feiguihua de rensheng fojiao* 非鬼化的人生佛教), but went one step further and laid the foundations for a Buddhism without deifications (*feitianhua de fojiao* 非天化的佛教).” Compared to Yin Shun, Taixu was “more inclusivistic regarding Buddhist deities, heavens, hells, and devotional practices.” Yin Shun’s perspective was that these were, at best, upāya or “expedient means” (*fangbian* 方便) and at worst, heterodox accretions to be stripped away. Yin Shun produced a large body of writings on the doctrinal history of Buddhism, and “champion[ed] the vocabulary and the content of the Āgamas and early Mahāyāna doctrines over later formulations.”<sup>84</sup> This motif of positioning reform as the return to an earlier orthodoxy, though not notably evident in Taixu’s work, is a theme that is common among other Buddhist

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<sup>81</sup>Ji Zhe, 44.

<sup>82</sup>Ji Zhe, 48.

<sup>83</sup>Bingenheimer, Marcus. “Some Remarks on the Usage of Renjian Fojiao 人間佛教 and the Contribution of Venerable Yinshun to Chinese Buddhist Modernism,” in *Development and Practice of Humanitarian Buddhism: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Hsu, Mutsu, Chen, Jinhua, and Lori Meeks. (Hualian, Taiwan: Tzuchi University Press, 2006), 141–161.

<sup>84</sup>Bingenheimer, 159.

modernist movements, including those of Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Japan. However, the differences between “humanistic Buddhism” as formulated by Taixu and those promoted by Yin Shun and his students are such that Marcus Bingenheimer suggests that “humanistic Buddhism” should be considered an emic term, and not used as a category in scholarly research.

Yin Shun is considered important to the development of Taiwan’s Buddhist modernism, not only as a theorist, but also as a teacher of many of Taiwan’s Buddhist leaders. Yin Shun taught Xing Yun 星云, the founder of Buddha’s Light Mountain (Foguang Shan 佛光山), and Sheng Yan 圣严, the founder of Dharma Drum Mountain (Fagu Shan 法鼓山). Also, Yin Shun’s mentorship of Zhengyan 证严 also has an important place in the origin myth of Ciji; in 1963, he accepted her as a disciple and bestowed her dharma name. Thus, Taiwan’s most influential Buddhist new religious movement’s claim descent from Taixu’s humanistic Buddhism, via his student Yin Shun.

Of these organizations, Ciji is most closely associated with charity work. Ciji has had an active presence in the PRC since 1992, when it participated in relief efforts in response to severe flooding in Hunan.<sup>85</sup> Since then, Ciji has been able to maintain a consistent presence in the PRC, despite the ups and downs in cross-straits relations, including the notably rocky period during 1995-1996. This has been facilitated by Ciji’s “non-confrontational, non-antagonistic, and apolitical” style of engagement, summed up by its policy of “three no’s”: “no politics, no religion, no propaganda” when working in the PRC.<sup>86</sup> The gendered,

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<sup>85</sup>André Laliberté, “‘Love transcends borders’ or is ‘blood thicker than water’: The charity work of the Compassion Relief Foundation in the People’s Republic of China,” *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 2, (2003): 243-261.

<sup>86</sup>Laliberté, “‘Love transcends borders,’” 260.

feminine public image of Ciji helps to sustain the credibility of its determined apolitical stance, even as the organization has grown larger and more influential. This reputation for aloof integrity depends in part on Zhengyan's ethereal public presence (a crystal sculpture for sale in the gift shop of Xiamen's Ciji office depicts her gazing down at a globe with a look of detached benevolence) and the organization's association with a core demographic of upper-middle class women who do not work outside of the home. Like the "angel in the home" trope of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Anglophone world, the gendered, feminine charisma of Ciji provided a compelling alternative, and implicit rebuke, to the cutthroat, male-dominated worlds of politics and speculative capitalism during Taiwan's economic boom of the 1980s and 1990s. Even at home in Taiwan, the organization continues to remain aloof from party politics, and active Ciji members are discouraged from participating in politics or political demonstrations.<sup>87</sup>

Perhaps even more important to Ciji's enduring presence in the mainland as noted previously is its approach of partnering with cash-strapped local governments while bypassing negotiations with central authorities that might have more ambivalent attitudes towards the organization's presence and activities. This strategy continued until 2008, throughout which period Ciji was "encouraged to provide relief, help establish schools in impoverished areas, and contribute to the reconstruction of communities affected by flood or quakes, but was not allowed to set up a permanent presence."<sup>88</sup> In 2008, Ciji obtained official registration as a mainland charity. Since then, it has set up a number of new liaison offices in

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<sup>87</sup>C. Julia Huang, "Genealogies of NGO-ness: The Cultural Politics of a Global Buddhist Movement in Contemporary Taiwan," *positions* 17, no. 2 (2009): 347-374.

<sup>88</sup>André Laliberté, "The growth of a Taiwanese Buddhist association in China: Soft power and institutional learning," *China Information* 27, 1(2013), 81 - 105.

mainland China, including a mainland headquarters in Suzhou. Leaders of the foundation's administrative board have also managed to leave their imprint on mainland Chinese institutions. Wang Tuan-Cheng, the brother of Ciji's founder Zhengyan, has served as a member of the honorary board of China's national philanthropic association.<sup>89</sup>

To summarize, organizations that claim an affiliation with "humanistic Buddhism" exert a significant influence on mainland Chinese Buddhism today. NGO-like Taiwan-based Buddhist organizations such as Ciji are closely identified with humanistic Buddhism. Furthermore, "humanistic Buddhism" has been incorporated into the official Buddhist ideology promulgated by the Buddhist Association of China (BAC). During his lifetime, Taixu doubted whether his planned reforms had made an impact. However, today, the controversy surrounding Taixu's humanistic Buddhism centers less on whether or not it has exerted an influence on Chinese Buddhism than whether or not this influence is positive. In Taiwan, Ciji has attracted criticism from those who blame the organization's dominance in social service provision in Taiwan for perpetuating a social service paradigm based on traditional charity, impeding activism that would address structural inequalities and encourage the development of a modern social welfare system. C. Julia Huang reports that, in the early 1990s, "journalists and activists began to call Ciji a 'money vacuum' and a 'religious monopoly of social welfare.'"<sup>90</sup> In response to this wave of public criticism, Ciji adopted a more cautious approach to publicizing its fundraising successes. Since 1993, it no longer reveals annual donations amounts or membership figures. A seemingly frustrated Ciji Foundation staff member explained, "People only look at how much money we have. No one

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<sup>89</sup>Laliberté, "Growth of a Taiwanese Buddhist association," 124.

<sup>90</sup>Huang, 362.

cares how much we have done.”<sup>91</sup>

In 1968, Holmes Welch anticipated contemporary criticisms of humanistic Buddhism with his remark that Taixu’s greatest failing was that he “seems not to have pondered deeply enough whether, if Chinese Buddhism were reformed in the manner he proposed, it would still be Buddhist or even Chinese.”<sup>92</sup> One concern is that Taixu’s thought, particularly as carried on and interpreted by his student Yin Shun, has had a secularizing influence. According to some critics, the this-worldly orientation of humanistic Buddhism has been used to justify an overly accommodating and complicit relationship with the CCP, which in turn has contributed to the commercialization of Buddhism and a watering down of Buddhist doctrine. A recent set of scathing editorials, appearing on news outlet Fenghuang, critique humanistic Buddhism as overly “politically correct,” and scientific, even atheistic, in outlook.<sup>93</sup> Li Lian critiques humanistic Buddhism as overly beholden to now-dated intellectual paradigms bound up with a history of Western imperialism. From his perspective, humanistic Buddhism has strayed too far from Buddhism’s essential quality of not just engaging with, but surpassing and transcending, the human realm. The West, Li Lian argues, has moved past reductive 19<sup>th</sup> century rationalism and social evolutionism and re-discovered its own religious traditions. He argues that it is time for China to have the confidence in its own indigenous intellectual traditions to do the same.

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<sup>91</sup>Huang, 362.

<sup>92</sup>Welch, Holmes, *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism, 1900-1950*, (Harvard University Press, 1967), 288.

<sup>93</sup>Jiang, Jinsong 蒋劲松, “Guanyu renjian fojiao Taixu fashi she ruhe dui dizi Yinshun jinxing jiupan de” 关于人间佛教太虚大师是如何对弟子印顺进行纠偏的, January 13, 2016, [http://fo.ifeng.com/a/20160119/41541384\\_0.shtml](http://fo.ifeng.com/a/20160119/41541384_0.shtml); Li Lian 李利安, “Li Lian: Dangdai renjian fojiao suo mianlin hexin lilun wenti” 李利安:当代人间佛教所面临的核心理论问题, January 19, 2016, 2016[http://fo.ifeng.com/a/20160113/41538625\\_0.shtml](http://fo.ifeng.com/a/20160113/41538625_0.shtml).



Another critique of “humanistic Buddhism” compares it unfavorably with the equally activist, “Engaged Buddhism” associated with Vietnamese monk and activist Thích Nhất Hạnh. Like Taixu’s initial formulation of “humanistic Buddhism,” “Engaged Buddhism” developed in a context characterized by military conflict and political instability. Present-day formulations of humanistic Buddhism, however, developed in the context of strong authoritarian states, under CCP rule in mainland China and KMT martial law in Taiwan. They tend to be apolitical—some would say politically complicit. They are not activist in orientation and do not attempt to address systemic causes of suffering or advocate structural solutions to social problems.

Though Taixu was a patriotic revolutionary monk, his vision of nationalism was non-violent and anti-essentialist; his vision for the future of the Chinese state was nested within pan-Asian and universalist projects.<sup>94</sup> He emphasized the need for independent monastic authority. Ji Zhe, however, convincingly argues that, as formulated by Zhao Puchu in the official rhetoric of the BAC, “humanistic Buddhism” with its this-worldly orientation, provides a rational argument for compliance with the CCP. The actual primary content of “humanistic Buddhism,” then, as the term is deployed in the official Buddhism of the CCP, is pragmatic cooperation with the CCP and its policy goals.<sup>95</sup> As for Ciji, though it advances a vision for radical social transformation, this vision is imagined in terms of the moral conversion of one individual at a time leading to broadening social effects, rather than in terms of structural change. As mentioned previously, members are expected to eschew politics and political activism, which are considered to be this-worldly domains of self-aggrandizing striving and competition.

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<sup>94</sup> Ji, 51.

<sup>95</sup> Ji, 45.

### *C. Almsgiving, Merit-Making, and the Ritual Economy*

Charities identified with “humanistic Buddhism,” such as Ciji, are important actors in mainland China’s religious charity sphere. Though “humanistic Buddhism” may have had a diffuse impact on Chinese Buddhism, the majority of Xiamen’s Buddhist institutions bear little resemblance to NGO-like organizations such as Ciji. In interviews, I found that mentioning the taken-for-granted BAC orthodoxy and the official buzzword “humanistic Buddhism” actually tended to elicit an unenthusiastic response. Most temples’ major form of engagement with the public is not through charitable fundraising or volunteer activities, but rather through festivals and other public ritual events. Lay sponsorship of the merit-making activities of Buddhist clerics, including sponsorship of ritual services, is economically important to Buddhist monasteries. This is true not just of Buddhist organizations in general, but also of charities in particular, which often tie ritual services to charitable giving—for example, by holding dharma assemblies (法会, *fahui*) as charitable fundraisers.

The rhetoric associated with humanistic Buddhism, with its Protestant-inflected anti-ritual and anti-superstition bent, also may include a tendency to treat ritual and charity as opposites, rather than as compatible ways of caring for sentient beings. In Taixu’s original formulation of “Buddhism for human life,” concern for the living is rhetorically opposed to an excessive focus on performing rituals for the dead. Indeed, many Buddhist clerics express ambivalent attitudes towards these rituals—whether because they feel that lay demand for these rituals reflects a lack of knowledge and understanding of Buddhism, because they take up too much time and are a distraction to clerics, or because they feel they are too

commercial.<sup>96</sup> This ambivalence is summed up in a pejorative phrase used to describe performing rituals for a fee, *gan jingchan* (赶经忏), “hustling [around] to perform scripture-penance [rituals]”.<sup>97</sup> In the practices of many Buddhist temple charities, however, philanthropy and ritual sponsorship are closely intertwined. For this reason, it is important to consider how contemporary Buddhist charities draw on earlier models of lay sponsorship of Buddhist institutions, which includes lay sponsorship of rituals performed by Buddhist clerics.

### 1. Buddhist Institutions as Fields of Merit

One particular consideration that may enhance the capacity of Buddhist charities to raise funds relative to other types of organizations is the close relationship between donations to Buddhist institutions and the production of religious merit (*gongde* 功德). Donations to Buddhist institutions are widely understood (including, or perhaps even especially, by many Chinese who would not consider themselves committed Buddhists) to constitute an investment, or an exchange, rather than a gift. At least, that is, if one accepts Derrida’s sense of the impossible *true* gift, impossible because only a gift given *outside* of time, an impossibility, could completely rule out the expectation of return.<sup>98</sup> Contributions to

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<sup>96</sup>Douglas M. Gildow, “The Chinese Buddhist Ritual Field: Common Public Rituals in PRC Monasteries Today,” *Journal of Chinese Buddhist Studies* 27(2004), 59-127.

<sup>97</sup>Gildow, 90.

<sup>98</sup>Michael Walsh, *Sacred Economies: Buddhist Monasticism and Territoriality in Medieval China* (Columbia University Press, 2013), 9. For other works that discuss the relationship between merit-making and the material support of Buddhist institutions in varied contexts, see James Egge, *Religious Giving and the Invention of Karma in Theravada Buddhism* (Routledge, 2013); Jacques Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society: An Economic History from the Fifth to the Tenth Centuries*, translated Franciscus Verellen (Columbia University Press, 1998); Gregory Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India* (University of Hawai’i Press, 1997); Rachele M. Scott, *Nirvana for Sale?: Buddhism, Wealth, and the Dhammakaya Temple in Contemporary Thailand*, (SUNY Press, 2009).

Buddhist temples are exchanged for what Michael Walsh has called the “magico-religious commodity” of merit—though one might just as well call merit a “magico-ethical” or “religio-ethical” commodity. In fact, merit might be said to occupy an intermediary space between categories of ethics and magic, between human and divine agency, and between natural causality and spirituality. In the context of Buddhist rituals, merit accrues to participants and is also often “transferred” to specified deceased relatives. Sponsoring Buddhist rituals is a way to benefit deceased ancestors. Thus, according to Walsh, “[m]erit transfer was an investment to overcome debt within a patrimonial institution of the Chinese family clan.”<sup>99</sup>

In his analysis of the economics of Buddhist institutions during the Song dynasty, Walsh describes monasteries as participants in “Buddhist economies of salvation,” or, as he puts it elsewhere, a process of “socio-karmic exchange.”<sup>100</sup> In exchange for donations—of which land was the most important—Buddhist monasteries supplied religious merit and the social prestige that was connected to sponsorship of Buddhism. Walsh writes,

Buddhist monastic institutions produced a variety of vital and material commodities in medieval Chinese society such as oil, flour, and bridges, and others apparently less mundane, for example, religious merit;...[M]erit was the most powerful magico-religious commodity they produced and disseminated.<sup>101</sup>

Though merit can be accumulated through any virtuous act, merit-making and almsgiving are most closely associated with donations to the *sangha*, the Buddhist monastic community. According to this idea, a Buddhist monk has the obligation to act as a “field of merit,” (*futian* 福田) producing more merit through his activities than was initially “sowed.” Land was

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<sup>99</sup>Walsh, 18.

<sup>100</sup>Walsh, 34.

<sup>101</sup>Walsh, 109.

important to the imaginary of Chinese Buddhism, for example, in the case of the Pure Land or “Buddha land” (*fodi* 佛地) and materially important as a source of income and crops.<sup>102</sup>

Prior to the 20th century, the Buddhist monastic economy was based on revenues from these donated landholdings, which were exempt from taxation through most of the imperial era.

Buddhist texts frequently use agricultural metaphors; they refer to “‘cultivating,’ ‘planting,’ ‘the sewing of good karma’, and ‘reaping the benefits.’”<sup>103</sup> Walsh argues that land was

the key component in an exchange environment instituted by these powerful monasteries. On a material level, in the Chinese monastic context, land was the source of food and the sustenance of monks. On a more ideological level, it was part of a discourse on Buddhist practice: to donate land was to be a good Buddhist. This material logic was vital...to the long-term success of Buddhist religion in China.”<sup>104</sup>

During the tumultuous 20th century, many Buddhist monasteries in mainland China lost their large landholdings, whether due to economic privation forcing the sale of monastery lands, or their seizure by the state. Though the revenues of Buddhist monasteries are no longer derived from rents from donated landholdings, the capacity of Buddhist organizations to convert donations to religious merit remains important to the economics of Buddhist institutions. Indeed, it is conceivable that the nonprofit charitable foundation could become a new paradigmatic model of the “field of merit”; quite similar to donations of land in earlier times. After all, a donation to a foundation is not merely a gift but an investment in the continued, merit-generating activities of the organization.

In recent years, there have been a handful of scandals involving the use of funds collected at Buddhist monasteries. For example, in 2014, a journalist from Xinhua, the official press agency of the PRC, published an investigation of the use of donations collected

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<sup>102</sup>Walsh, 4.

<sup>103</sup>Walsh, 109.

<sup>104</sup>Walsh, 4.

at Beijing's Tanzhe Temple.<sup>105</sup> He found that, out of the donation boxes on the grounds of the temple, only those labeled *guang zhong futian* (广种福田, “widely cultivate the field of merit”) were being used to support the monastery. The revenues collected from boxes labeled *gongde xiang* (功德箱, “merit box”), which accounted for a majority of the boxes, were received not by the temple, but rather by the scenic site associated with the temple, a publically traded company. They had been set up not by monks, but by employees of the Tanzhe scenic site (See Figure 16). It is uncommon for temples to provide detailed information about their finances to the general public.

## 2. Patronage, Conspicuous Consumption, and Social prestige

In medieval China, merit-making considerations also influenced Buddhist institutions' contributions to public welfare and public infrastructure projects. John Kieschnick has written on the impact of the Buddhism on the production of three types of material objects—books, temples, and bridges—all of which were made possible by Buddhist donors in order to accumulate merit.<sup>106</sup> Building bridges, in particular, was considered in Buddhist tradition to be an emblematic act of charity, because it made the journeys of travelers safer and made it possible for old, weak, and infirm people to cross rivers. The first documentation of the association between monks and bridge building appears in 6th century biographies of eminent monks, and monks and monasteries continued to be associated with bridge-building

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<sup>105</sup> Hai Pengfei, 海鹏飞, “Ni gei simiao juan de xianghuo qian qu na le?,”你给寺庙捐的香火钱去哪了? [Where does the incense money you donate to temples go? ], NetEase *Reguancha*, 网易热观察, NetEase, October 13, 2015, <http://zhenhua.163.com/15/1013/17/B5QS9DST0004662N.html>.

<sup>106</sup>Kieschnick, 212.



**Figure 16. A cartoon showing donations from the “merit box” of an ancient temple becoming the “slush fund” of a publically traded company.<sup>107</sup>**

projects through the Qing (1644-1911). Bridge building projects depended on collaboration between monks, commoners, and local officials, and officials sometimes called on monks to fundraise on their behalf for bridge building projects (a situation not entirely dissimilar from the demands that Buddhist organizations provide the social welfare services that temples are experiencing now). Kieschnick provides an example of a 17th century monk who, in a record pertaining to the construction of a bridge, divided donors into three categories: “the selfless who donate only to help others, those who donate to ‘secure blessings in their future or to redeem a fault in their past,’ and those who donate to impress others for the good it will do them in this world.”<sup>108</sup>

<sup>107</sup>Jiang Yuexin, “Yu mu hun zhu,” 鱼目混珠, [Passing off fish eyes as pearls], Xinhua News Agency, December 2014, 2012, <http://stock.hexun.com/2014-12-17/171521892.html>.

<sup>108</sup>Kieschnick, 212.

In other words, in addition to merit-making, sponsorship of Buddhist temples was, as scholars Timothy Brook and John Kieschnick have argued, a way of enhancing one's reputation and gaining social prestige. According to Brook, patronage of Buddhist institutions was one way in which local elites were able to "publicize [their] elite status outside the state realm."<sup>109</sup> Of course, as Kieschnick observes, "philanthropy is most always driven by a medley of motives" and that, "it is as naïve to grant exclusive importance to a hunger for prestige as it is to attribute all acts of charity to a selfless desire to do good"—an insight that certainly applies to today's Buddhist donors as well.<sup>110</sup>

Though the particular social meanings associated with sponsorship of Buddhism has undoubtedly changed, it is certainly the case that the names of donors—individuals, families, businesses, and even government bureaus—are often prominently displayed in contemporary monasteries. Temples have areas with stone inscriptions providing the names of donors who contributed to construction. Temples' announcements of dharma assemblies include tiered pricing lists for various levels of sponsorship of temple activities, which can be quite costly. The cost of acting as the chief sponsor of a dharma assembly (*fahui gongde zhu* 法会功德主) can be, based on the announcements I have seen, as much as 58,000 RMB (\$8415), though I would not be surprised if it could be much more. Temples' practice of auctioning off the right to burn the first piece of incense of the New Year, with some temples setting up auctions on Taobao, has also raised concerns about excessive commercialism, and encouraging conspicuous consumption.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>109</sup>Timothy Brook, *Praying for Power: Buddhism and the Formation of Gentry Society in Late-Ming China*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University and Harvard-Yenching Institute, 1993).

<sup>110</sup>Kieschnick, 212.

<sup>111</sup>"Temples auction off 'first incense' for lunar new year on Taobao," *Sina English*, February 6, 2015,



Prior to dharma assemblies, the names of donors and their donation amounts are recorded on large posters. During the dharma assembly, different donation amounts are reflected in different displays during the ceremony (i.e. displaying a name on a strip of paper, versus a large paper stele). Donors also publicly approach monks and present red envelopes during dharma assemblies. In order to avoid the crass implication that the merit produced is, in fact, proportional to the amount of the donation, explanations of Buddhist doctrine also emphasize that it is the sincerity and piety of the donor, rather than the amount of the donation, that determines the merit accrued. Another way of diffusing the tensions surrounding the fraught relationship between money and merit is to emphasize that the merit produced through virtuous acts is so abundant as to defy quantification, as in the expression “*gongde wuliang*” (功德无量), “the merit is immeasurable.”

Nonetheless, some lay Buddhists are uncomfortable with what they see as a tendency to imply that larger donations generate more merit, and criticize what they see as a tendency of clerics to cultivate their relationships with lay followers who are more likely to donate generously while ignoring those who cannot make large donations. Gareth Fisher’s work describes communities of followers who develop around lay preachers who attract audiences by preaching in the courtyards of large temples in Beijing. These communities offer an alternative to Buddhist institutions that some participants may perceive as having been corrupted by the pursuit of wealth and fame. These lay preachers are more accessible to working class Buddhists, who perceive clerics as gravitating to wealthier and better-educated disciples. Their teachings combine Buddhist teachings and moral teachings influenced by the

Maoist era, while critiquing the corruption and obsession with consumption in contemporary society.<sup>112</sup>

During the reform period, China's major Buddhist institutions have amassed tremendous wealth. As a monk at Beijing's Fayuan Temple put it, "If the temples at the four sacred mountains withdrew their money, the banks would all fail."<sup>113</sup> Questions related to fundraising are closely bound up with the principal tensions and controversies facing Chinese Buddhism today. The financial interests of Buddhist institutions foster ambivalence among temple authorities regarding the commercialization of temples and temple services, sponsorship of Buddhism as a form of conspicuous consumption, and nakedly instrumental interpretations of Buddhist doctrine that clerics might generally be inclined to dismiss as "superstitious" and ill-informed.

In Bataille's writings, the "accursed share" is a portion of the proceeds of productive labor that, in archaic societies, was set aside for unproductive destruction, often in the context of religious ritual. This profitless consumption collapses the subject-object distinctions that are created through utilitarian processes of production, restoring a state of intimacy threatened by the means-ends rationality of productive activity.<sup>114</sup> In the context of contemporary Chinese Buddhism, in which charity is encouraged as a matter of state policy, it might make sense to view the charitable contributions of Buddhist temples as a kind of inverse of Bataille's "accursed share": a kind of tributary offering to the utilitarian-productivist order. Charity diverts a portion of the wealth squandered on religious pursuits

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<sup>112</sup>Gareth Fisher, "The Spiritual Land Rush: Merit and Morality in New Chinese Buddhist Temple Construction." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 67 (2008): 143-170; *From Comrades to Bodhisattvas: Moral Dimensions of Lay Buddhist Practice in Contemporary China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2014).

<sup>113</sup>Hai Penfei.

<sup>114</sup>Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy, Volume I: Consumption*, trans. Robert Hurley (Zone, 1988), 37, 55-57.

towards ends that are productive from the point of view of the state. This instrumentalization prevents the unproductive wealth accumulated by Buddhist institutions from appearing to seriously challenge or undermine the utilitarian-productivist ethics promoted in the official discourse of the state.

3. CCP Karma: Is reciprocal return for good deeds an officially sanctioned “Chinese value”?

As noted earlier, one of the explanations given in official discourse for current policy changes promoting Buddhist charity is that religious organizations have a unique role to play in inculcating “traditional Chinese values,” which will in turn contribute to the propagation of a “culture of charity” in China. Given the centrality of the logic of merit-making and karmic retribution to the practice of Buddhist charity, it might make sense to wonder whether or not these Buddhist doctrines could be considered to be components of the “traditional Chinese culture” thought to contribute to a “culture of charity.” Do concepts of merit-making constitute “traditional Chinese values” to be preserved, according to the putatively disenchanted logic of official CCP discourse? After all, even though concern with merit-making is sometimes characterized as a cause of unproductive ritual expenditure and amoral instrumental rationality, it is also expressed in ways that emphasize rationalized ethical behavior and a prudent logic of investment and return.

Certainly, from the point of view of intellectual history, there is a convincing case to be made for considering concepts of merit-making and reciprocal return as strong candidates for constituting “traditional Chinese values,” at least as much as any others. By the Han dynasty, the existence of some form of cosmic retribution for human deeds was a background assumption shared by all of the major strands of Chinese thought: Confucianism, (Celestial

Master) Daoism, and Buddhism.<sup>115</sup> As early as the Zhou Dynasty the reciprocity between the ruler and Heaven (*tian* 天) was understood as having a moral dimension. Rulers held the mandate to rule (*tianming* 天命) for as long as they ruled virtuously. During the Han, the theory of “action and response” or *ganying* (感应) developed—the idea that the cosmos responds “automatically and naturalistically” to human action through the movements of *qi*. Also during the Han, the Buddhist doctrine asserting that an individual’s fate is determined by past karma, through the operation of “cause and effect” (*yinguo* 因果, *yinyuan* 因缘), was introduced to China.

In late imperial China, ledgers providing a numeric systems for tracking merit accumulation, assigning points to various good and bad deeds, became popular among literate elites.<sup>116</sup> Morality books (*shanshu* 善书), of which these ledgers represented one form, reached the peak of popularity during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Though the authors of these ledgers provided a system to numerically record merit accumulation based on the amount of money spent on charitable acts, they also enjoined their audience that success in accumulating merit depended on internal sincerity, freedom from a desire of recognition, and the absence of an expectation of reward.

Cynthia Brokaw’s study of these merit ledgers provides insight into the range of perspectives on retribution for good deeds that existed among Ming-Qing moralists. Yuan Huang, the author of one popular morality book, claimed that good deeds could result not only in longevity or a desirable rebirth, but might also be rewarded with exam success, career

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<sup>115</sup>Cynthia Brokaw, *The Ledgers of Merit and Demerit: Social Change and Moral Order in Late Imperial China*, (Princeton University Press, 2014).

<sup>116</sup>Brokaw, 61.

advancement, and the birth of sons.<sup>117</sup> Troubled by the success of Yuan Huang's ledger and its instrumental view of morality, scholar Liu Zongzhou produced his own work, "*Manual for Man*" (《人谱》, *Renpu*), which outlined a program of moral cultivation incorporating "legers of misdeeds," but that resolutely avoided discussion of the possibility of reward for good deeds.<sup>118</sup> Liu emphasized that the purpose of the manual was internal cultivation, and that it was best to avoid the "fragmentation of purpose" that might result from discussion of material rewards.<sup>119</sup>

Scholars affiliated with the neo-Confucian Donglin movement were also reluctant to attribute particular events to rewards for good deeds. Only Buddhists, the Donglin scholar Chen Longzheng remarked, could believe that virtuous deeds could be rewarded with wealth and good fortune for one particular person.<sup>120</sup> Instead, he saw good deeds as producing "diffused and widespread good fortune" (through the stirring up of good *qi*) rather than a precise material reward for the individual who performed them.<sup>121</sup> Nonetheless, Chen Longzheng included stories of material rewards for virtuous acts in his edifying lectures for benevolent societies.

Thus, the idea of a reciprocal response to human actions is a widely shared assumption among many strands of Chinese thought, and spans both elite and popular traditions. The genealogy of this concept involves a long history of interaction and mutual influence among formulations associated with different intellectual traditions, such that it makes sense to refer

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<sup>117</sup>Brokaw, 230.

<sup>118</sup>Brokaw, 155.

<sup>119</sup>Brokaw, 230.

<sup>120</sup>Brokaw, 145.

<sup>121</sup>Brokaw, 145.

to it as “Chinese” rather than “Buddhist” or “Confucian.” The reciprocal reward of good deeds is often assumed to involve the intervention of gods and spirits who observe the actions of humans. However, it can also be conceived of in naturalistic term, in the sense of operating according to a mechanism that does not depend on the conscious intervention of any form of supernatural agency.

According to Brokaw, this theme of success in life as being a result of virtuous actions may have particularly resonated during the Ming-Qing transition because this was a time of social upheaval and mobility; it provided a legitimating ideological accounting which accounted for the existing social hierarchy, despite its apparent instability.<sup>122</sup> In fact, this theme seems to resonate with the themes of upward mobility and self-reliance featured in public service announcements associated with the “Chinese dream” campaign. The theme that good deeds produce future rewards is a very prominent one in the recent “Chinese dream” campaign of public service announcements promoting traditional Chinese values (e.g. See Figures 17-18). Like Buddhist metaphors of the “field of merit,” these public service announcements draw on organic metaphors of planting and harvest. One advertisement features the idiom, “Plant melons, receive melons, accumulate kind acts, receive blessings.” The idea that good deeds will result in good fortune is quite prominent in recent campaigns celebrating Chinese values. Thus, despite the Confucian flavor of the sanitized traditional Chinese values promoted in recent official discourse, these messages are also not too out of step with the merit-making considerations that influence donations and participation in volunteer work for Buddhist charities.

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<sup>122</sup>Brokaw, 3.



Figure 17-18. “Accumulate merit and do good deeds, receive good fortune”; “Plant melons receive melons; plant good acts, receive happiness.”

#### *D. Summary*

In this section, I have analyzed some of the factors that have contributed to the recent growth in Buddhist charities. In doing so, I have attempted to show how changes in state policy have interacted with other changes affecting Buddhism during the reform period,

influencing the current situation of Buddhist charities. Though the reasons for the rapid growth of Buddhist charities in the PRC are multi-faceted, changes in the legal and regulatory framework for nonprofits, which have eased the registration process for new charities and improved tax incentives for charitable giving, are certainly one important factor. In 2012, several relevant central government agencies issued a document encouraging religious organizations to engage in charitable work. The rationale for this is not only that religious organizations could play a beneficial role in supplementing the state social safety net, but also that religious organizations' participation in charity work has the potential to promote values consistent with the social goals of the state. According to this argument, the "traditional Chinese values" associated with religions such as Buddhism provide a basis for building a "culture of charity" (*cishan wenhua* 慈善文化; a stated goal of the 2016 landmark Charity Law) compatible with Chinese culture.

Organizations associated with "humanistic Buddhism" (*renjian fojiao* 人间佛教) are important actors in mainland China's Buddhist charity sphere. Furthermore, the influence of reformist, humanistic forms of Buddhism may be particularly salient for Buddhist charity in Xiamen. Buddhist reformer Taixu, a founding figure of humanistic Buddhism, served as abbot of Nanputuo Temple Charity, where he implemented reforms to monastic education. Taixu's ideas were a source of inspiration to a later generation of Taiwanese Buddhist leaders. Ciji, a Taiwan-based Buddhist organization known for humanitarian work, has been active in the mainland since the 1990s, including in Xiamen. The BAC, the official supervisory organ for Buddhism in the PRC, has made the promotion of "humanistic Buddhism" part of its official ideology.



Taixu developed his concept of “humanistic Buddhism” during a tumultuous period in Chinese history, marked by political instability and the encroachment of imperial powers. He was influenced by the anti-ritual and anti-superstition attitudes of many intellectuals during his time, who felt an urgent need for modernization and reform. He called for a reformed Buddhism that would focus on the needs of the living, in place of what many saw as an excessive emphasis among Buddhist clerics on performing rituals for the dead.

Anti-ritual themes have persisted, and in some forms, intensified, in later formulations of humanistic Buddhism. This rhetoric tends to treat an emphasis on practical, this-worldly activity as being implicitly opposed to an emphasis on merit-making ritual services. In practice, however, the fundraising practices of many charities closely associate charitable donations with the provision of ritual services by Buddhist clerics. The merit-producing ritual services performed by Buddhist clerics are among the most important sources of revenue not only for Buddhist organizations in general, but also for Buddhist charities in particular. Despite moral anxieties which surround the relationship between money and merit, sincere piety and conspicuous consumption, and ritual and superstition, the ritual services performed by Buddhist clerics remain an important source of the wealth that has allowed Buddhist temples to endow foundations and sponsor charity work. Buddhist institutions’ function as “fields of merit,” with the capacity to transmute funds into religious merit, thought to produce good fortune in this life and favorable rebirth in the next, remains salient to the fundraising model of contemporary charities.

### III. Fieldwork Methods and Findings

#### A. Methods

Fieldwork for this project was conducted in Xiamen during the summer of 2014, and included participant observation in temple events and in-depth interviews of temple staff and charity volunteers. Cecilia Yu, a graduate student in the anthropology program at Xiamen University, assisted me in scheduling and conducting interviews. We conducted interviews at six temples, each of which has an affiliated charitable association and/or foundation: Fantian Temple 梵天寺, Guanyin Temple 观音寺, Huxiyan Temple 虎溪岩寺, Nanputuo Temple 南普陀, Puguang Temple 普光寺, and Shishi Chanyuan 石室禅院. We also interviewed a volunteer at the Xiamen Ciji Liason Office (慈济厦门联络处); (See Figure 19 for map of temple locations).<sup>123</sup> The interviews generally lasted from 45 minutes to one hour. The topics discussed included the organization's history and background, types of charitable activities conducted, experiences with registration, interactions with state agencies, major sources of funding and fundraising methods, perceived successes and challenges, and perceptions and opinions regarding the current state of Buddhist charity in mainland China. When conducting the interviews, I assured interviewees that I would not associate their names with the interviews. I have avoided associating particular remarks with particular organizations unless this information provides necessary context. In hindsight, the relatively small numbers of

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<sup>123</sup> I also interviewed a staff member and volunteer at Tongxin Charity Association (*Tongxin cishan hui* 同心慈善会). Though the staff of the charity is emphatic that it is a secular organization, it was (mistakenly) identified as a Buddhist charity by several people I spoke to in Xiamen, including Buddhist clerics. This is most likely because one of the board members is a Buddhist nun. In fact, the organizations' influences are quite eclectic. There is a fairly large alter in the office with a statue of Guanyin. Down the hall, in a room that looked like a dance studio, a group of mostly elderly people in all-white garments, who I was told were cancer patients, were spinning in circles with arms extended to meditative music. The volunteer who was giving a tour of the facility explained that this "Turkish spin dance" or "Turkish spin yoga" was promoted by the charity, as a way of improving one's physical and mental health, and that they had even offered a class at Xiamen University with over one hundred participants.

people involved in some organizations mean that the interviews cannot be understood (and were likely not perceived) as fully anonymous. For the most part, clerics and volunteers were quite willing to be interviewed, though at more active temples, whose clerics tend to be quite busy, obtaining interviews required slightly more persistence.



**Figure 19. Locations of Buddhist charities.**

Cecilia Yu and I also interviewed staff at agencies that regularly interact with Buddhist charities, in order to obtain a different perspective on the topic. We interviewed an employee on the grounds of Xiamen Municipal Buddhist Association office, located in Nanputuo Temple. We also conducted interviews at the Xiamen Municipal Charity Federation and the Huli District Charity Federation, offices of GONGO (government-organized NGO), which has a relationship with charities that an employee described as one of mutual supervision and

oversight. The Xiamen Municipal Charity Federation administers the foundations of several smaller temples.

### ***B. Field Site: Distinctive Features of Xiamen***

Although officially registered Buddhist charities now exist in all regions of China, Xiamen most likely represents an exceptional rather than typical case of the growth of Buddhist charities. Xiamen's uniqueness stems in part from its location opposite Taiwan, as well as its history as the place of origin of many immigrants to overseas Chinese communities. During the Maoist period, Xiamen's economic development was not prioritized due to its strategically vulnerable geographic location. Robert Weller describes Xiamen as "relatively unfettered by the old centrally planned economy and its political apparatus...[T]here was less government superstructure to be thrust into the private sector."<sup>124</sup> Compared to its now large private sector, the government "occupies less social space," so to speak, than in comparably-sized cities, permitting more autonomy for non-state actors such as private companies and NGOs.

#### 1. Overseas Ties, Cross-Straits Relations, and Religious Revival

Fujian's links to Taiwan and Southeast Asia played an important role in the revitalization of religion in the province after the Cultural Revolution. Donations from overseas Chinese communities were important in funding temple reconstruction during the 1980s. Visits by overseas Chinese to Buddhist sites and ancestral temples were seen as helpful in attracting investment, and were generally embraced by local officials.<sup>125</sup> Furthermore, pilgrimages by Taiwanese worshippers are also thought to be helpful in enhancing cross-strait relations.

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<sup>124</sup>Weller, 30.

<sup>125</sup>Kenneth Dean, "Local Communal Religion in Contemporary Southeast China," *China Quarterly* 173, (June 2003): 336-358.

Some observers have noted that China engages in “Buddhist diplomacy” to enhance its relationships with South and Southeast Asian neighbors with large Buddhist populations. In fact, Susan McCarthy coined the term “Buddhist-industrial complex” to describe the entanglement of Buddhism, diplomacy, and state-led economic interests that she encountered during fieldwork in Southern Yunnan.<sup>126</sup> Buddhist sites’ potential to generate tourist revenue has, in some cases, led to struggles for control over the management of these sites. However, the willingness of state agencies to arrange for the return of confiscated land to Buddhist temples, and to provide funds for reconstruction, have, along with the revenues generated by temple sites, contributed to the rapid revitalization of Buddhism in the region. Overall, the perceived economic and diplomatic benefits of religious activities may be helpful in cultivating a liberal attitude towards religion among government officials in Fujian.

## 2. Humanistic Buddhism in Xiamen

The influence of reformist “humanistic Buddhism” may also, for various reasons, be particularly strong in Xiamen. Here, Taixu was active in building institutions for monastic education, training a generation of monks, and implementing some of his ideas. Nanputuo Temple is a regional Buddhist center housing over 600 clergy, and is the site of the Buddhist College of Minnan, a major Buddhist seminary. The temple has a significant historical connection to Buddhist modernism and humanistic Buddhism through its connection to reformer Taixu (1890-1947), who served as abbot from 1927-1938. Though Taixu was a sensitive figure during the Maoist period, due to his connections with the KMT, Nanputuo Temple now plays up its connection to this important reformer, particularly in relation to clerical education and Buddhist scholarship.

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<sup>126</sup>Susan McCarthy, “Economic Development and the Buddhist-Industrial Complex in Xishuangbanna,” in *Faiths on Display: Religion, Tourism, and the Chinese State*, ed. Tim Oakes and Donald S. Sutton, (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 157-182.

It is possible that these charity-oriented NRMs have had more influence on Buddhist practice in Xiamen than elsewhere in China, given the large number of Taiwanese visitors and immigrants and the frequency of cross-strait activities which bring together Xiamen's Buddhists and their Taiwanese counterparts. Though none of the clerics I interviewed had engaged in any specifically charity-oriented activities with Ciji, most had engaged in some sort of cross-straits exchange involving Ciji, and were generally familiar with the organization and its reputation for charity work. Furthermore, Taiwanese immigrants established a Ciji "liaison office" on Xiamen island during the late 1990s. In short, Ciji is quite active and visible in Xiamen. Even some non-Buddhists I met were aware of its charitable activities and its reputation for being well-organized and efficient in carrying out these activities.

### 3. Buddhism and the Minnan Ritual Economy

When I described my research project to people I met in Xiamen, I was often told that I came to the right place, because "Minnan people really believe in Buddhism (or, the Buddha/buddhas)." Furthermore, when I repeated this observation to Buddhist clerics I encountered, most of whom were not natives of Fujian province, many did not agree, or their agreement carried a bit of a sardonic tone. One monk I interviewed, who is from Sichuan, responded to the observation that Minnan people really believe in Buddhism by remarking, "They may believe in (*xin* 信) Buddhism, but they don't understand (*dong* 懂) what Buddhism is. They only come to the temple when they have a purpose (*you mudi* 有目的)." Not long after he made these comments, the interview was interrupted by a loud verbal dispute between two women waiting outside the temple office, which led him to comment on the low quality of Buddhist followers. Overall, he expressed little optimism about the newly

established charity foundation, whose activities, he said, had been so far confined to “hanging a sign” (*guapai* 挂牌), or registering, and an initial 10,000 RMB donation to the Red Cross. He perceived what he saw as lay people’s lack of interest in charity as a symptom of their poor understanding of Buddhism. Lay Buddhists I met also were also dismissive of practices that they saw as Minnan customs rather than authentic Buddhism, saying, “That isn’t Buddhism. That’s just superstition.”

The custom of making food offerings, chanting scriptures, or performing rituals once every seven days during the forty-nine days after the death of a relative, known as *zuo xun* 做旬 or *zuo qi* 做七, was also described to me as a Minnan custom, though it may very well be practiced elsewhere in China. Because it is not feasible for many people, due to the time and cost involved, to hold seven different rituals, this sequence can be shortened to three or even one. This ritual can also be called “making merit” (*zuo gongde* 做功德), because the merit generated by the ritual will be transferred to the deceased to help their journey to rebirth.

One form of ritual performed during this period is called *zuo chaodu* (做超度), and involves food offerings, scripture recitations, and “bestowing food” (*shishi* 施食), or feeding hungry ghosts. It usually takes place in the family member’s home, though it also can be held on the grounds of a temple. The cost ranges from 1,000-5,000 RMB per ritual, depending on how many monks are hired, the length and complexity of services performed, and the sponsor’s ability to pay. Sponsoring a temporary spirit tablet or “lotus seat” (*lianwei* 莲位), written on a yellow slip of paper during a *chaodu* dharma assembly is a much less expensive option for caring for the deceased, generally costing only 50 to 100 RMB. The most affordable option to care for the deceased would be for family members to read scriptures for the deceased at home. Though Buddhist clerics might assure lay people that this is just as

effective, most people do not feel qualified or knowledgeable enough to do this themselves, and would prefer to hire clerics to conduct the services.

Unlike interring ashes on the grounds of a temple, which I understand is popular everywhere, one practice that is prevalent in the Minnan region is the practice of installing a spirit tablet for a deceased relative or relatives (*li paiwei* 立牌位) in a hall in a Buddhist temple, rather than at home or in an ancestral temple. According to a Nanputuo brochure, this is also colloquially referred to as “entering the ancestors” (*jinzu* 进祖). This way, the deceased relative can hear the dharma when monks lecture or chant scriptures, helping to ensure a better rebirth. Some people also feel more comfortable knowing that a relative’s spirit tablet is cared for appropriately and that offerings are made even when they are busy, or if they feel uncertain about how to care for the spirit tablet appropriately. This can be done on a long-term, e.g. 10- or 20-year, or permanent basis. Again, the fees for this service vary widely, but can be as much as 10,000-30,000 RMB for a permanent tablet. Costs also vary based on the placement of the tablet—i.e. if it is closer to the front and center of the main altar or placed off to the side. Sometimes, the fee is associated with each name written on a spirit tablet for a whole family, rather than for the tablet as a whole. For an additional fee, the temple supplies offerings of fruit, candles, and so forth, which can be paid for on an annual or longer-term basis.

My analysis of the close relationship between payments for ritual services, merit-making activities, and the redistributive activities of Buddhist charities, and in particular my foregrounding of the concept of a “ritual economy,” draws on Mayfair Yang’s work on the relationship between popular religion and economic change in Wenzhou. During the 1980s, this region in southeast China, around 500 km north of Xiamen, became well known as a



success story for rural development. Its style of economy, based on household manufacturing and small- and medium-size privately funded enterprises, came to be known to as the “Wenzhou model” of rural development.<sup>127</sup> Despite their reputation as savvy entrepreneurs, Yang found that Wenzhou residents also had a reputation for “religious superstition” and excesses of collective consumption during life-cycle rituals. In the productivist discourse associated with capitalism and with the Chinese state, ritual is seen as withdrawing resources from legitimate uses and squandering them unproductively. Ritual excess is depicted as “wasteful,” “backward,” “ignorant” and “dangerous.”<sup>128</sup>

Unlike previous descriptions of the “Wenzhou model,” which ignored religious activity, Yang views high levels of “nonprofit ritual expenditure” as an integral feature of the Wenzhou economy. The revitalization of Wenzhou’s ritual economy: “cannot be seen merely *as the result* of economic development, for ritual life has also *fueled* economic growth (it often provides the organizational apparatus, site, and motivation for economic activity) and *constrained and channeled* it through the deployment of ritual consumption against capitalist accumulation.”<sup>129</sup> Like the people of Wenzhou, Minnan people are stereotypically seen as both unusually entrepreneurial and unusually “religious” or “superstitious.” Thus, it is possible that the “ritual economy” of the Minnan region shares some features with Wenzhou.

Ingmar Heisse’s work also offers useful insights for understanding the dynamics of the “ritual economy” of Xiamen, particularly with regards to the rituals held in connection with the Ghost Month (*gui yue* 鬼月). In urban areas in mainland China, ritual activities outside of

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<sup>127</sup>Yang, Mayfair Mei-hui, "Putting Global Capitalism in Its Place: Economic Hybridity, Bataille, and Ritual Expenditure 1." *Current Anthropology* 41, no. 4 (2000): 477-509; 480.

<sup>128</sup>Yang, 489.

<sup>129</sup>Yang, 480.

designated religious spaces, and, in particular, ritual activities deemed “superstitious,” such as those involving ghosts and the dead, are restricted by the state. The Ghost Festival, formerly an important event in the ritual calendar of the Minnan region, was targeted both by the Republican and Communist governments as “backward” and “feudal.” As recently as 1997, there were no public ritual activities held in Xiamen in relation to the Ghost Month. The effect of these restrictions, however, was ultimately to give Buddhist institutions a larger “market share” with regards to the performance of these formerly stigmatized rituals:

[I]n mainland China, ironically, the government-enforced distinction between religion and superstition has led to a situation that the Buddhist monastery seems to have a monopoly of large-scale rituals for the dead, like Ghost Month recitation rituals. These dharma assemblies and the monasteries where they are held therefore contain remnants of the beliefs and practices the state has long derided, although on a much reduced scale.<sup>130</sup>

### ***C. Xiamen’s Buddhist Charities: An Overview***

Officially registered charitable organizations associated with Buddhist temples adopt one of two organizational structures: the foundation or the association. Smaller temples tend to have only a foundation (*jijinhui* 基金会), while three of Xiamen’s also have a membership association (known as a “charitable association” (*cishan hui* 慈善会) or “merit association,” (*gongdehui* 功德会). While the larger temple foundations are self-managed, several of the smaller temples’ foundations are managed by the Xiamen Municipal Charity Federation, a GONGO under the supervision of the Xiamen municipal government. The initial endowments of the smaller temples’ foundations range from around 100,000 RMB to around 200,000 RMB (around 16,000-32,000 USD); one of the foundations, Huxiyan Temple,

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<sup>130</sup>Ingmar F. Heise, “For Buddhas, families and ghosts: the transformation of the ghost festival into a dharma assembly in Southeast China,” in *Buddhist funeral cultures of Southeast Asia and China*, ed. Paul Williams and Patrice Ladwig (Cambridge University Press, 2012): 217-237.

recently increased its endowment capital to 500,000 RMB (about 76,000 USD). By law, foundations must spend 70% of each year's revenues on public service activities. The source of the initial endowment of these smaller foundations was the general revenues of the temples. These revenues are derived primarily (and in order of importance for most temples) from 1) donations by companies and individuals, 2) clerics' performance of religious rituals, and 3) incense money (*xianghuo qian* 香火钱).

Associations are membership organizations funded by monthly or annual fees. These fees ranged from 100-120 *yuan* per year in 2014; in 2016 Nanputuo Temple Charitable Association increased its fees to 365 *yuan* a year (one *yuan* per day). The membership of these organizations typically overlaps with, but tends to exceed, the members of the laity active in temple activities. According to a charity director, when the association was first established in the early 2000s, the members were generally elderly, but since then they have grown more diverse in terms of age. The Shishi Chan Temple Charitable Merit Association (*Shishi Chanyuan cishan gongde hui* 石室禅院慈善功德会) also facilitates a form of mutual self-help among association members. Members who experience a time of financial need—for example, due to treatment costs for a serious illness—may include a note in the charity's bulletin. The charity bulletin includes a list of these requests with an anonymized version of the name of the person making the request (e.g. 李 xx) and a description of their problem, e.g. needing money for cancer treatment. This membership- or subscription-based form of charitable organization, based on monthly fees, resembles the practices of many contemporary NGOs and religious organizations worldwide, but it also has a precedent in the practices of charitable organizations in pre-modern China. Joanna Handlin Smith's study of literati participation in the benevolent societies, called *tongshan hui* 同善会, or *shanhui* 善

会, during the Late Ming describes these organizations as have a similar structure to contemporary charitable associations. They were also supported by monthly membership dues.<sup>131</sup>

### 1. Overview of Charities

**Nanputuo Temple Charity:** Nanputuo Temple Charity was the first officially recognized Buddhist charity in the PRC, established in 1994. Nanputuo Temple is a regional Buddhist center, and its charitable organization is widely admired as a model of an effective Buddhist temple charity. Its charitable association has more than fifteen thousand members, and has carried out projects in more than 23 provinces. The charity makes major donations to disaster relief efforts, and contributes to hospital and school building projects in impoverished areas. It supports senior homes and orphanages, and provides scholarships for poor students. The temple operates a not-for-profit clinic with a full time doctor, pharmacist, and two nurses. It provides free consultations for poor patients, and provides free consultations and treatments to the general public during major Buddhist holidays.

Nanputuo’s “release of life” (*fangsheng* 放生) activities (the purchase and release of animals) are also classified as activities of Nanputuo Temple Charity (rather than as activities of the temple in general). Unlike other branches of the charity’s activities (disaster relief, poverty relief, medicine, care for orphans and elderly people without families, and education), *fangsheng* activities—which are considered a merit-making activity *par excellence*—generate substantial revenue for the charity. In 2012, the most recent year in which the charities’ finances have been made publically available, about 2.4 million *yuan*, or roughly

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<sup>131</sup>Joanna Handlin Smith, *The Art of Doing Good: Charity in Late Ming China* (University of California Press, 2009).

one fifth of the charity's revenue, came from performing *fangsheng* activities. The other major revenue sources of the charity were donations (7.4 million *yuan*) and charitable association membership fees (3 million *yuan*).

**Ciji:** The other major Buddhist charitable organization operating in Xiamen is the international Taiwan-based humanitarian organization Ciji. The organization was brought to Xiamen by Taiwanese immigrants in 1999, first collaborating on projects with the Bureau of Education and Fuqing Hospital. According to a volunteer who helped establish Ciji in Taiwan, these projects allowed Ciji to gain traction in Xiamen and demonstrate its reliability and good intentions to local officials. The city government granted Ciji a piece of property on the northern part of Xiamen Island so that the organization could build a center for its activities. This part of the island seems to be just beginning to undergo commercial development, and is turning into something of a Taiwan-themed area with many Taiwanese restaurants and businesses.

Xiamen's Ciji members volunteer at hospitals and nursing homes, make donations to schools and fund scholarships, and organize blood drives. Volunteers also visit low-income households to personally deliver staples such as rice, cooking oil, toiletries and so on; in 2012 they visited nearly 1,200 households in Xiamen's Jimei district to deliver supplies. Ciji also engages in activities intended to promote environmentalism and vegetarianism, including organizing volunteers to pick up trash in public areas. Ciji is notable, not only for the large scale of its activities, but also for its well-organized activities and the conspicuously disciplined comportment of its volunteers, which was commented on by members of other organizations who I interviewed. When I visited the large Ciji center on the northern part of Xiamen Island, it was over 90 degrees, but there was no air conditioning in the building,

unlike other temple offices, which had air conditioning units. The volunteers were wearing uniforms, which, I was told, were made from recycled water bottles. Also, a volunteer explained to me that they were encouraged to eat a vegetarian diet and carry their own reusable chopsticks with them when dining out to avoid waste. The Ciji commissioner (a leadership position in the organization) who Cecilia Yu (the Xiamen University graduate student who helped me with my interviews) and I interviewed was wearing a dark blue *qipao* that looked a like an old-fashioned army nurse's uniform. At first, I found the hushed atmosphere a little bit intimidating, but the volunteers were friendly; while we were waiting to interview the commissioner, one of the volunteers working at the gift shop showed us a basket with rolled up slips of paper with Ciji founder Zhengyan's sayings and told us to choose one. As we unrolled and read them, she leaned close to me, smiled, and touched my arm conspiratorially: "It really fits your situation, doesn't it? When I first visited here, the one I chose really fit my situation."

The Ciji commissioner expressed some critical attitudes towards other Buddhist institutions in Xiamen. She said that they spending time "hitting a wooden fish," or "using real money to buy fake money, and then burning it," a practice she considered not only wasteful but also harmful to the environment. According to this commissioner:

The similarity [between us and other Buddhist charities] that we both help people, but there are differences: temples mostly use dharma assemblies, chanting scriptures, and those kinds of methods to do charity. But Ciji uses actions, and leaves the temple to go deeply among the people. We invest in people and don't ask for reciprocation. We practice through action.

Nonetheless, it would be mistaken to understand Ciji as narrowly utilitarian in its outlook or aspirations. The Ciji commissioner I interviewed told me a story about how once, when shown a plan for temporary housing for disaster victims, Zhengyan insisted that each

building include a window. She wanted the housing to be a pleasant place to live. The Ciji commissioner I interviewed also placed a lot of emphasis on personal contact between volunteers and recipients of assistance. She explained that when Ciji volunteers present donated items to the recipients, they are expected to bow a full ninety degrees to thank the recipient for providing them with the opportunity to engage in charity. She expressed the hope that, at some point, recipients of assistance from Ciji would themselves be moved to engage in charity work, creating a broadening circle of social concern.

***Smaller Temple Charities:*** Five smaller temples in Xiamen, with forty or fewer resident monks, have also established charities or foundations within the last few years. One common activity of these foundations is to hold banquets or ceremonies, sometimes in conjunction with a holiday, for area residents who belong to a particular class of needy people (i.e. the seriously ill, disabled children, elderly people without families), and then use the occasion to distribute food staples such as rice and cooking oil, clothing, toiletries, and red envelopes.

Many of the smaller temples also collect donations for second hand stores, called “Loving Heart Markets” (*Aixin chaoshi* 爱心超市). However, several of the clerics reported that collecting clothing donations has become more burdensome and time-consuming, as well as less appreciated, in recent years. They reported that visitors dump off large bags of used clothing, sometimes unwashed or in poor condition, which clerics have to wash and dry. Meanwhile, one cleric said, the standard of living of poor people has improved, such that when monks offer used clothing, they often say that they do not need it, or, if offered excess food offerings from the temple, say that they do not like to eat sweets.

Shishi Chanyuan, located in a suburban of Xiamen, offers a free summer camp for school-aged children on the theme of traditional Chinese culture and values. This way of

framing the camp, which is consonant with the latest political messaging, helps to resolve any lingering stigma that might be associated with a religious intuition providing education to minors, given that religious education of minors remains, strictly speaking, prohibited by law. A cleric I interviewed at the temple bemoaned the lack of moral education and materialistic values among today's youth, saying that many of the children had never gone without videogames or air conditioning before participating in the camp. The purpose of the camp is to remedy this situation by teaching the children about Buddhist culture.

#### ***D. Buddhist Charities and State Agencies***

Perhaps unsurprisingly, all of the interviewees reported that the government supported their charitable work. Two interviewees said that charity work is a way of helping out the government (something that, I am guessing, one would be unlikely to hear from a staff member of a religious charity in the United States). After the end of the Cultural Revolution, the central government ordered that legal rights to monastic property should be returned to Buddhist instructions. Whereas, in many areas, local governments dragged their feet or only partially returned the property, in Xiamen, government agencies thoroughly complied with the central government's request to return property to the control of Buddhist temples. The government also contributed funds to rebuild properties that had been damaged or fallen into disarray. The abbot of one of the temples described charity work as a continuation of a reciprocal relationship with the government: "They gave the work that needed to be done for the temples a lot of necessary help and support." Now, "with regard to disadvantaged groups, we can help the government and lighten their burden a little bit." According to a retired government official who works at the Huli District office of the Charity Federation (the GONGO that manages the funds of many temple charities), charities and the government



“mutually complement one another” (*xiang fu xiang cheng* 相辅相成): “There are some truly impoverished people, but the government is not able to quickly help them. Charitable organizations are, at this time, are able to help the government and share its worries (*fenyou* 分忧), [by] resolving the problems of the *laobaixing* (老百姓, “the people”).” Thus, the idea that charities help the government or “share its worries” is a trope in the official discourse describing the role of charities.

A few interviewees cited the support of the government as among the factors that contributed to the recent proliferation of religious charities. For example, when asked why more temple charities had been established in recent years, one interviewee said, “It’s because in the past few years, the government has supported these activities more and more. The government is getting better at implementing a series of religious freedom policies.” One monk at a smaller temple implied that, at least to some degree, top-down pressure from the Buddhist Association had contributed to his temple’s establishing a charitable foundation. He compared the Buddhist Association to a train (*lieche* 列车): if the Buddhist Association now wanted temples to engage in charitable work, the temple had no other option but to follow along. He felt that the temple where he resided had been dealt with unequally by the Buddhist Association. When he visited Shanghai, his impression was that the temples there had been given relatively equal opportunities for development. In Xiamen, however, the Buddhist Association had only worked to develop Nanputuo and neglected the other temples. This meant, that because the temple was relatively close to Nanputuo, it attracted little foot traffic from worshippers, as people in the area tended to go to Nanputuo when they wished to worship. Therefore, the temple did not have much revenue from incense money. To raise funds, the monks instead had to frequently hold dharma assemblies and perform rituals to

attract visitors. He also described the local Subdistrict Office (*jiedao banshichu* 街道办事处) officials' habit of referring needy people to the temple for assistance in what, I subjectively felt, was a mildly put-upon tone.

When Buddhist charities conduct major activities, they seek the approval of the Religious Affairs Bureau (*Zongjiao ju* 宗教局) and the Civil Affairs Bureau (*Minzheng ju* 民政局). According to a Ciji commissioner, "We operate under the supervision of the Religious Affairs Bureau and Civil Affairs Bureau to conduct activities, but the government doesn't meddle with them. Ciji has its own operations methods. The government is actually able to help Ciji to conduct its activities better. There are even some government officials who, after they retire, choose to come to Ciji to volunteer." Subdistrict Office (*jiedao banshichu* 街道办事处) officials also often interact with temple charities, particularly with regards to identifying needy households requiring assistance. Sometimes, the municipal or district Charity Federation (the GONGO that manages the foundations of many smaller temples) works with the Subdistrict Office to identify local residents who need charitable assistance on behalf of temple charities. Interviewees also mentioned their interactions with a few other government agencies, for example, when securing building permits for temple renovations or obtaining security guards for temple events which attract large crowds. The Buddhist Association also collaborates with Buddhist charities to conduct charitable activities, the most important one of which is Xiamen's annual Buddhist Charity Week (*Cishan Zhou* 慈善周), a week long period during which many of the city's Buddhist charities hold charity events and banquets.

When I visited Nanputuo Temple charity, I also interviewed a staff member of the Xiamen Buddhist Association, as its office is conveniently located on the temple grounds.

The staff member described two recent conflicts that had occurred between the temple and the Buddhist Association. The first was the complaint that Nanputuo Temple Charity was inclined to “run off to” (*paodao* 跑到) distant provinces, whereas the position of the Buddhist Association was that there were more than enough needy people in Fujian province, so there was no need for the charity to take on projects elsewhere. The other was that the Buddhist Association was initially against Nanputuo Temple, which had formerly charged a fee for admission, doing away with its admission ticket. However, after the second year, increased revenues from incense money (*xianghuo qian* 香火钱) more than made up for the loss of the admission ticket. He speculated that this was because people were more inclined to donate generously when they had not already been charged at the door.

Despite saying that the relationship between Buddhist charities and the government was generally positive, interviewees did express frustrations about what they perceived as constraints on the scope and autonomy of religious charities in mainland China. For example, a nun mentioned that one way in which the situation of mainland charities differed from that of Ciji (in Taiwan) was that Ciji could hold more public activities, whereas Buddhist activities in the mainland were restricted to temple grounds.<sup>132</sup> Another interviewee compared the situation of Buddhist charities in mainland China to those of Hong Kong and Singapore, where he had visited, saying that mainland Buddhist charities were not allowed to

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<sup>132</sup>This does not mean that interviewees were necessarily rigid in their interpretation of religion policy. When I asked interview subjects whether charity provided a means to spread Buddhism, only one (a lay Buddhist who served as director of a charity as a volunteer), emphatically insisted that the religion and charity work were separate. Most of the Buddhist clerics I spoke to seemed completely untroubled to point out that one benefit of a charitable organization would be that it might introduce people to Buddhism who might not be introduced to Buddhism through other channels (for example, by visiting temples). Buddhist clerics also had no problem talking about performing rituals in private homes. In a lecture at UCSB on religion legislation, Dr. Zhong Ruihua compared religious organizations’ interpretation of policies to drivers in the United States’ tendency to drive 10 mph over the speed limit.

operate at the same scale. For example, he said, it was unlikely that a Buddhist organization in mainland China would be permitted to independently operate a hospital or a university, or similarly large-scale institutions.

A final point that is worth noting is that many leaders of Buddhist institutions also hold roles in state or quasi-state organizations. Several of the abbots of temples where I conducted interviews also hold offices in quasi-state or political advisory organizations, such as the Buddhist Association, Youth Federation, and Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). A number of Buddhist clerics (including in Xiamen) hold positions in both local and provincial, or provincial and national, organizational bodies. This overlap in personnel facilitates communication and continuity in concerns and objectives among different organizational levels.<sup>133</sup> These roles keep Buddhist leaders conversant with political campaigns and policy objectives, such that many leaders are adept in “reframing” the objectives of Buddhist organizations in language acceptable to the state, as well as describing policy objectives and campaigns in terms acceptable to Buddhist clerics and lay followers.<sup>134</sup> Thus, leaders of Buddhist organizations tend to be very up to date with regards to policy objectives and adept at couching their organizations’ activities in up-to-date official language.

### ***E. The Ritual Economy and Charitable Fundraising***

While some interview subjects mentioned recent policy changes as important in encouraging charity, practically all of them emphasized that the recent uptick in Buddhist charity is a continuation of an older tradition, rooted in doctrines emphasizing compassion (*cibei* 慈悲) and almsgiving (*bushi* 布施). According to this narrative, recent changes in

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<sup>133</sup>Ashiwa and Wank, 346.

<sup>134</sup>Ashiwa and Wank, 351.

conditions have allowed Buddhist charity to re-emerge and flourish. For example, an abbot I interviewed emphasized that modern Buddhist charities not only continued, but also improved upon a premodern tradition of Buddhist charity. According to this abbot, premodern temples tended only to dispense aid in cases of plague or natural disasters, and were limited in how much they could help, due to a lack of resources and logistical difficulties caused by their locations in remote areas. Greater prosperity, improved transportation and communications technology, and improved methods for providing relief allow contemporary Buddhist organizations to be more effective and consistent in their charitable activities.

While most of my interviewees saw the recent growth in Buddhist charity as the outcome of a combination of various factors, two were emphatic that the single greatest factor enabling the growth in Buddhist charity was the “economic situation,” (*jingji qingquang* 经济情况), or “economic development” (*jingji fada* 经济发达). Improved economic conditions and greater prosperity among lay patrons has created a situation in which temples are able to take in revenues in excess of that which is required to sustain the monastic community and maintain temple buildings, allowing for the development of Buddhist charities.

As mentioned previously, the primary sources of revenues for Buddhist temples in Xiamen are donations (by companies and individuals), fees associated with ritual services, and incense money. The funds for charitable associations come primarily from donations and membership fees. Donations to Buddhist institutions—whether incense money given by worshippers, contributions to temple building or renovations, ritual sponsorship, and sponsorship of vegetarian meals for clerics or other guests (*fengzhai* 奉斋)—are all thought to produce merit. The accumulation of merit is thought to lead to good fortune in this life, and a desirable rebirth in the next. Not only did general temple funds, derived in part from

merit-making rituals services performed by Buddhist clerics, provide the initial endowment for the Xiamen's temples' charitable foundations, but charitable fundraising practices are also tied to merit-making ritual services in more direct ways. For example, the benefits of membership in a charity temple association include a dharma assembly performed on behalf of members. Nanputuo Temple Charity Association offers an "Asking For Blessings and Avoiding Calamities Thousand Buddha Dharma Meeting" (*Qiufu xiaozai qianfo fahui* 祈福消灾千佛法会) performed on behalf of members, "free of charge" (*mianfei* 免费). The members include people who are active participants and volunteers in many temple activities; however, according to an interview with a nun who works at the charity's office, more committed members also sign up their husbands, children, and other family members for membership in the charitable association, so that these relatives can receive blessings and merit even if they don't actively participate in temple activities.

Temples sometimes combine dharma assemblies and charitable fundraising. In fact, one interviewee, a volunteer lay director of a temple charity, mentioned that an advantage (*youshi* 优势) enjoyed by temple charities is that "some of the funds can be collected from the temple's dharma assemblies, [which is] relatively convenient." Some temples hold dharma assemblies to commemorate and raise funds for victims of natural disasters, accidents, or incidents of violence. For example, dharma assemblies were held following the 2014 Kunming train station attack. A portion of the funds raised by these rituals is donated to relief efforts. These dharma assemblies are dedicated to helping the spirits of the deceased, who are at greater risk for becoming wandering ghosts because of the sudden, violent, or untimely nature of the death to "transcend" (*chaodu* 超度). These dharma assemblies also have exorcistic connotations—in the sense that they placate potentially troubled, and hence

dangerous, spirits. This kind of charitable *fahui* is a continuation of a similar Republican era practice that was documented by Holmes Welch in his interviews with Buddhists who had left China for Southeast Asia at the beginning of the Maoist period. Welch suggests that the activities of Christian missionaries may have inspired some of the novel forms of Buddhist charity that emerged in urban areas during the Republican period. A lay Buddhist interviewed by Welch described organizing numerous dharma meetings in response to natural disasters, including, for example, a “flood relief dharma meeting,” between 1926 and 1949.<sup>135</sup> Sponsorship of these services provides spiritual as well as material assistance to disaster victims.

In addition to inspiring charitable donations, merit-making considerations may also encourage volunteer work. I met one volunteer—in fact, a volunteer at a secular charity—who had started his work with the charity after his son was diagnosed with a genetic disease that caused him to go blind. Soon after, he lost his job. A friend suggested that his misfortunes might be the result of bad karma, and that he might be able to improve his situation by volunteering.

Not all beliefs about merit-making, however, are conducive to charitable fundraising. Some donors believe that a donation to temple building or renovation has benefits that a donation to charity does not. While a charitable donation would produce merit for the donor only once, a donor who contributed to a temple renovation would continue to accrue merit each time the building was used to make offerings or chant scriptures. Once I heard about this, I asked a few other clerics what they thought about this belief. Most agreed with a nun who told me that, “Of course there are some people who think this way, but it is superstition.” Only one of the clerics, an older monk I interviewed at a suburban temple,

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<sup>135</sup>Holmes Welch, *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism, 1900-1950* (Harvard University Press, 1967), 378.

seemed to agree with this theory about merit making—at least, I inferred that this was the case, because, when I asked him about this belief, rather than dismissing it as false as had the other people with whom I had talked, he simply slowly explained the logic to me. That is, he seemed to interpret my question as a request for clarification, and did not deny that this interpretation was correct.

In the 2012 document encouraging religious charity discussed earlier, one of the reasons given for the claim that religious organizations are well-positioned to engage in charity work is the comparatively high degree of public trust in religious organizations. Indeed, all of the clerics I spoke to said that the Buddhist followers who were their main donors had a high degree of trust in their organization's use of funds. However, one monk emphasized that while lay Buddhist followers had a high degree of trust in Buddhist organizations, the same degree of trust was not present among the general public or especially among members of the media, who, he claimed, have a tendency to seek out scandals involving Buddhist monks. He told a story about a recent incident in which a young woman wearing a short dress, presumably a tourist, had asked the abbot of a temple to pose for a photo. He agreed in order to be polite. However, the photo was later circulated on social media with the claim that the young woman was his mistress. He used this story to illustrate the public's interest in scandals involving the misbehavior of Buddhist clerics.

Buddhist stories and doctrinal discussions of merit-making emphasize the production of merit as related to the worthiness of the recipient of the gift. It is the duty of clerics to behave ethically so that they might function as productive “fields of merit.” However, particularly given that many casual visitors to temples are likely to view their donations primarily as offerings to deities, and give little thought to the monastic institution that mediates this



exchange, many donors may in fact be relatively unconcerned with how their donation is used. For example, I spoke to a woman who was worshipping at a small temple in Xiamen who told me that she frequently visits temples and attends dharma assemblies. She said that when “making an offering to the bodhisattva,” she provides 10-15 RMB of incense money when circumstances allow. When her financial situation does not allow her to spare the money, she doesn’t worry about it. She said that she had simply never thought about what happened to the money she donated. When asked, she said that she was sure that the monks used it appropriately, but repeated that she had never thought about how it might be used. Thus, it likely the case that certain kinds of donations to Buddhist organizations may be made with relatively little regard for how they might be used, at least relative to donations to a secular charity.

***F. Case Study: A Chaodu Ritual Fundraiser***

Despite the tendency in certain discourses associated with “humanistic Buddhism” to treat charity and ritual activity as opposed (e.g. Taixu’s call for a Buddhism focused on benefiting the living rather than performing rituals for ghosts and the dead), there are also charities which closely link charity and ritual practices. In August, I attended a dharma assembly held in honor of the Zhongyuan Festival or the Ghost Festival that was combined with a charitable fundraiser. On the 15<sup>th</sup> day of ghost month, when the hungry ghosts are released from their world to wander the world of the living, Buddhist temples perform a series of ceremonies to feed and pray for hungry ghosts and the masses of lonely souls. Participation in the assembly produces merit for lay sponsors and participants, which is also transferred to specified individuals, often relatives or deceased ancestors.

In 2014, the Zhongyuan Festival took place shortly after an earthquake in Yudian County, Yunnan, that killed 600 people and destroyed thousands of homes. To respond to this tragedy, the Shishi Chan Temple chose to dedicate their ritual to helping those who died in the earthquake “transcend” and secure a good rebirth. This was shortly before the Zhongyuan Festival 中元节, also called the Ghost Festival 鬼节, held on the 15th day of the 7th lunar month, when ghosts are thought to be released from hell to roam the earth. Shishi Chanyuan held two Zhongyuan Festival events dedicated to the festival: the “Yulanpen Repaying Blessings Dharma Assembly and Yunnan Ludian Disaster Area Prayer and Charitable Donation Activity” (盂兰盆报恩法会暨云南鲁甸灾区祈福慈善捐款活动 *Yulanpen baoen fahui ji Yunnan Ludian zaiqu qifu cishan juankuan huodong*), as well as the “Zhongyuan Festival Repaying Blessings and Yunnan Ludian Disaster Area Victims ‘Ferrying Across’ [Rite for the Dead and] Flaming Mouth [Rite of the] Yoga (Tradition) Dharma Assembly” (中元节报恩暨云南鲁甸地震灾区遇难者超度瑜伽焰口法会, *Zhongyuan jie baoen ji Yunnan ludian dizhen zaiqu yunanzhe chaodu yujia yankou fahui*).<sup>136</sup> This ritual extinguishes the flaming mouths of hungry ghosts so that they are able to consume food offerings. The temple donated 30,000 RMB (4866 USD) of the proceeds of these activities to the Blue Sky Rescue Team (Lantian Jiyuandui 蓝天救援队), the disaster relief branch of the Ciji organization. The event was held in the mortuary hall, and participants could sponsor temporary “lotus seats” written on yellow paper slips or larger paper stele so as to transfer the merit to deceased ancestors, for a fee of 50 or 100 RMB per name.

The participants in the event were younger- to middle-aged and well dressed; they appeared to be mostly business people or other professionals. A friend who accompanied me

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<sup>136</sup>Translations of the names of rites are based on those of Ingmar Frédéric Heise, *Buddhist Death Rituals in Fujian*, PhD diss., University of Bristol, 2012.

to the ceremony remarked on the numerous luxury cars, including several BMWs, in the temple parking lot. In fact, someone had parked a white Jaguar convertible directly outside the mausoleum in the temple courtyard at a jaunty angle, and at one point during the ceremony, the alarm started to go off. The ceremony was quite long, so some people milled in the courtyard, taking care of fussy children or making phone calls. In the courtyard, there were piles of food offerings arranged with more paper stele. Towards the end of the ceremony, donors approached the clerics performing the ritual and presented them with red envelopes. The monks performing the ritual scattered bread and snack foods wrapped in plastic on the floor of the mausoleum and in the courtyard, as offerings for the ghosts and wandering souls. Each participant was given a stick of incense and the group processed out to the courtyard. There, the monks lit a large wooden boat stuffed with paper money, and a display of fireworks.<sup>137</sup>

The ritual served all of the following purposes: raising funds for survivors of the earthquake; a ritual to help the souls of victims “transcend” and attain a desirable rebirth; a ritual to feed the hungry ghosts who wander the earth during the seventh lunar month; and a means of generating merit for participants and their ancestors. It commemorates the dead, yet has the exorcistic connotation of propitiating beings who died a traumatic death and keeping their souls at bay. Taixu’s formulation of humanistic Buddhism advocated the care for the living over concern with performing rituals for gods and ghosts. This event, however, combines charity with precisely those forms of Buddhist ritual of which reformers tended to most disapprove: a ritual for ghosts and the souls of the dead, conducted in an atmosphere of

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<sup>137</sup>Paul Katz has described the use of burning boats in mid-summer exorcistic rituals of communal purification in late imperial China; this exorcistic symbolism would seem to resonate here. See Paul Katz, *Demon Hordes and Burning Boats: The Cult of Marshal Wen in Late Imperial Chekiang* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

ritually performed abundance (the generous feeding of hungry ghosts with piles of food offerings) and conspicuous consumption. Yet, a portion of the proceeds were directed towards the disaster-relief branch of the NGO-like, modernist humanistic Buddhist organization Ciji. Finally, this event combines a ritual commemorating the Ghost Festival, stigmatized as “superstitious” and restricted by the state since the Republican period, with fundraising for earthquake relief, which since the Wenquan earthquake seems to have taken the connotation of being the paradigmatic form of patriotic charitable activity.

## VI. Conclusions and Discussion

In this thesis, I have described how state policy has interacted with other changes affecting mainland Chinese Buddhism during the reform period, including the influence of “humanistic Buddhism” and the revival of a ritual economy, to produce the recent growth in Buddhist charities. Existing literature on the growth of religious charities in mainland China has focused on the implications of this phenomenon for relationships among “religion,” “state,” and “society.” One approach taken by Western political scientists has been to ask whether religious charities have achieved sufficient autonomy from the state to be considered a form of “civil society,” and hence to represent a nascent force for democratization. This project, however, attempts to depart from a conceptual and normative framework structured by the assumption that, within any particular context, “civil society” either does, or ought to, represent society to the state from a position of independence. Instead, it makes sense to proceed from a recognition of the interdependence and interpenetration among “religion,” “state,” and society” which are a structural feature of officially recognized religious organizations in the contemporary PRC. Following the work of Ashiwa and Wank, I have attempted to treat the “state-society nexus” as the site of open-ended interaction and negotiation among multiple actors and interests.<sup>138</sup> Thus, this thesis has described the roles of a wide variety of actors and organizations have played in bringing about the recent growth in Buddhist charity. These include central government agencies and policy think tanks as well as local government agencies, most notably the Religious Affairs Bureau, Civil Affairs Bureau, and Subdistrict Offices. It includes organizations that occupy an intermediary position between state and non-state actors, notably the Buddhist Association and Xiamen

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<sup>138</sup>Ashiwa and Wank, 338.

Municipal Charity Federation. Finally, it includes representatives of Taiwan-based NGO-like Buddhist new religious movements (i.e. Ciji), Buddhist temple leadership, and lay volunteers and donors to Buddhist organizations (whose “superstitious” demand for the merit-making ritual services provided by Buddhist clerics has greatly accelerated the financial recovery of Buddhist organizations). The interactions among these actors cannot be captured by a binary model which opposed civil society to the state.

Xiamen’s largest and most influential Buddhist charitable organizations, working through formal and informal channels, forged their own paths to carrying out charity work beginning in the 1990s. Thus, the revival of Buddhist charity in the PRC began prior to recent shifts in policy encouraging religious organizations to engage in charity work and easing the process of official registration for charities. However, there is also a top-down, policy-based component to the recent uptick in numbers of officially recognized Buddhist charities. According to interviewees, the Buddhist Association has actively encouraged and collaborated with temples in engaging in charity work. At least one Buddhist charity in Xiamen was registered as part of a government pilot program. Furthermore, Buddhist charities, particularly smaller charities, work closely with state and quasi-state agencies in carrying out their activities. For example, in Xiamen, a government-organized NGO manages the foundations of smaller temples. This government-organized NGO also works with state agencies to identify recipients for the charitable aid provided by Buddhist charities. Larger charities, however, rely less on government- and quasi-government organizations and instead are able to manage their finances and conduct activities more independently.

Both of Xiamen’s largest Buddhist charities have historical connections to the modernist forms of humanistic Buddhism, via historical connections to its founder, Taixu. Humanistic

Buddhism, which de-emphasizes, and even devalues, ritual in favor of concrete action in the world, is an influential strand in contemporary mainland Buddhism. The legacy of Taixu's early 20th century, modernist Buddhism has influenced both the official Buddhism of the Buddhist Association, and the Buddhist new religious movements of Taiwan, such as Ciji, which are also increasingly active in the mainland. In the official rhetoric of the Buddhist Association, the pragmatic and this-worldly orientation of "humanistic Buddhism" furnishes an argument for the compatibility of Buddhism with the CCP's policy goals. In many ways, Ciji and other Taiwanese Buddhist groups embody an ideal of religion as "'pure' (spiritual and ethical in nature) and well organized...[and] useful (patriotic and contributing to social welfare and progress)" that, according to Goossaert and Palmer, represented the Chinese state's basic outlook on religion throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>139</sup> Yet, these organizations' capacity for autonomous activity, given their access to vast resources that allow them to independently operate large institutions such as schools and hospitals, also represents a possible challenge to the current constraints on what is permissible within the current system for managing religious organizations in the PRC.

Some formulations of "humanistic Buddhism" have a strong anti-ritual and anti-superstition bent. However, in the practices of many contemporary Buddhist charitable organizations, charity—generally seen as a feature of "modern," ethical religion—and ritual activities sometimes stigmatized as superstitious, instrumental, excessively commercial, are closely intertwined. Charitable fundraising benefits from the capacity of Buddhist organizations to convert donations into the magico-religious (or magico-ethical) commodity of merit. As with other Buddhist organizations, Buddhist non-profit NGOs function as "fields

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<sup>139</sup>Goossaert and Palmer, 58.

of merit” (福田 *futian*), in which the “seeds” planted by donations are thought to grow into rewards of good fortune in this life and in future lives. The fundraising activities of many Buddhist charities tie donations to ritual services provided by Buddhist monks.

Despite the persistence of a strand of anti-ritual rhetoric, which tends to treat an emphasis on practical, this-worldly activity as being implicitly in opposition to an emphasis on merit-making ritual services, the practices of many charities closely associate ritual services with charitable donations. The merit-producing ritual services performed by Buddhist clerics are an important source of revenue, not only for Buddhist organizations in general, but also of Buddhist charities in particular. Despite moral anxieties surrounding the relationships between money and merit, piety and conspicuous consumption, and ritual and superstition, the ritual services performed by Buddhist clerics remains an important source of the wealth of Buddhist organizations. This wealth has allowed temples to endow foundations and sponsor charity work. Buddhist institutions’ function as “fields of merit” with the capacity to transmute funds into religious merit, thought to produce good fortune in this life and favorable rebirth in the next, is significant to the fundraising practices of religious charities. Charity also diverts the wealth of Buddhist institutions towards achieving the state’s goals of public welfare. Policies encouraging Buddhist charity attempt to instrumentalize Buddhism in the service of the state’s social policy goals. This notwithstanding, the fundraising practices of many Buddhist charities remain deeply imbricated with practices of almsgiving, merit-making, and lavish ritual expenditure that have an ambivalent relationship to the utilitarian-productivist ethics promoted in official discourse.

Actually, the status of merit-making rituals and conspicuous consumption in the context of ritual sponsorship within official Buddhism is not so dissimilar from the status of



obligations based on *guanxi* relationships, “human feeling” (*renqing*, 人情) and “honor” (*yiqi*, 义气) within the culture of government officialdom as described in the work of John Osburg.<sup>140</sup> On one hand, there are elaborated discourses surrounding these moral values and related practices, which are apparently endemic and indispensable to institutions functioning as usual. On the other hand, these practices remain in persistent, unresolved tension with the universalistic ethics promoted in official discourse, from which perspective they are seen as wasteful and corrupt (or, in the equivalent for Buddhist rituals, wasteful and superstitious).

Recent policies aim to instrumentalize Buddhism to provide social services and inculcate wholesome values of altruism and social cohesion. However, Buddhist charity remains intertwined with elements that have an ambiguous relationship to the official, utilitarian-productivist morality promoted by the party-state. One way of conceptualizing current developments in mainland Chinese Buddhism is by drawing on Latour’s theorization of modernity as characterized by alternating processes of “purification” and “hybridization.”<sup>141</sup> Latour understands modernity as defined by the “work of purification,” i.e. “the drive to draw a clear line between humans and nonhumans, between the world of agency and natural determinism.”<sup>142</sup> According to this schema, both the “pure land on earth” envisioned by humanistic Buddhism and plans for a Maoist utopia can be understood as high modernist moments of “purification,” as both represent plans to re-shape the world through exercise of human agency. Taixu’s Buddhist modernism can be understood in terms of Protestant-

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<sup>140</sup>John Osburg, *Anxious Wealth: Money and Morality Among China’s New Rich* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 79.

<sup>141</sup>Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Webb Keane, *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 73.

<sup>142</sup>Keane, 3.

inflected efforts to eliminate “superstition, instrumental rationality, idolatry, and fetishism” from the practice of Buddhism. These reforms are undertaken in the name of restoring a greater purity to religious institutions; at the same time, these reform movements result in a greater emphasis on the capacity of human agency to transform the world along the lines of religious doctrines.

The sincerity and rigor of these efforts notwithstanding, “religious histories show that attempts at purification produce results that seem to be inherently unstable.”<sup>143</sup> According to Webb Keane’s interpretation of Latour, this is because even those movements which most emphasize transcendence of the considerations of the material world must be materially instantiated in institutions, codified language, and routinized ritual practices—which are then, themselves, vulnerable to renewed efforts at purification. According to this schema, the complex histories of religious organizations can be understood as produced through the iterative alternation of “purifying projects” with “countermovements towards materialization.”<sup>144</sup>

In mainland China, the purificatory schemes of the 20th century aimed to transform the world in part by circumscribing, or even eliminating, the role of supernatural agents. The cost of these totalizing, purificatory projects—which culminated in the “leftist errors” of the Cultural Revolution—proved to be high. During the reform period, mainland Chinese Buddhists rebuilt temples and revived ritual traditions. More recently, there has been a rapprochement between the CCP and the cultural traditions of China’s premodern past, including Buddhism. A new network of relationships is emerging that brings into contact Buddhist institutions, government agencies, internationalized concepts of NGO-ness, merit

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<sup>143</sup>Keane, 41.

<sup>144</sup>Keane, 41.

making and ritual practice, and the realm of ghosts and spirits. At the same time, it partially reproduces certain features of the pre-modern Buddhist ritual economy and pre-Maoist charitable practices.

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