

Changes in Tzu Chi.

By Yu-Shuang Yao and Richard Gombrich, October 2014.

Tzu Chi will soon be fifty years old. Since 2010 it has been the subject of almost 300 graduate theses written in Taiwan, and that number will surely have increased before this paper is published.¹

There has been widespread criticism of Tzu Chi for its lack of traditional Buddhist ritual and public observance of Buddhist festivals. Indeed, the movement has generally appeared somewhat austere in its lack of ritual and public spectacle, an austerity very much in the spirit of Tai Xu's criticism of the Chinese Buddhism of his day.

This year, on May 11th, Tzu Chi showed a new face to the world. The Buddha's birthday (according to the Chinese Buddhist calendar) was celebrated in every branch of Tzu Chi worldwide. In Hualien the Master herself presided over a spectacular celebration involving, we estimate, nearly 2000 participants. These participants included the Tzu Chi nuns, who live in Hualien at the Abode, the movement's headquarters; they normally lead reclusive lives and are not seen in public; so far as we can tell, this is the first time that they have taken part in any public ceremony. A similar ceremony was held on an even larger scale in Taipei at the Chiang Kai Shek Memorial Hall, and was observed by 300 members of the Buddhist Saṅgha who had been invited from around the world. This is the first time that representatives of other Buddhist movements, let alone ordained members of those movements, have been invited by Tzu Chi. Since Tzu Chi is such an overwhelmingly lay movement, this too represents a remarkable volte face. The Buddha's birthday has been celebrated by Tzu Chi since 2009, but on a far more modest scale and without Saṅgha participation. The Buddha's birthday coincides with Mothers' Day in Taiwan, and also with Tzu Chi's own

¹ National Library Archives of PhD and Masters' theses, Taiwan.
<http://ndltd.ncl.edu.tw/cgi-bin/gs32/gsweb.cgi/ccd=Am3vWe/search&result>

day, a kind of birthday for the movement. For Tzu Chi to choose Mothers' Day for its own anniversary seems to harmonise with the general spirit of the movement with which we are familiar.

The celebrations this year were of a new order of magnitude. The whole Hualien ceremony can be seen on Youtube² and lasts an hour. It is choreographed down to the most minute detail and must have demanded many hours of rehearsal. From the film, we estimate that there are between 1500 and 2000 people taking part, moving in time like so many puppets or automata as they solemnly gyrate through a series of formations. The Master stands immobile on a balcony front centre, in splendid isolation high above the throng. There are chants in unison, and dramatic moments of silence.

Except for the Master and the nuns, who wear the traditional plain grey cassock, everyone is in uniform. While it is normal for Tzu Chi members to wear prescribed clothing and have uniform hairstyles, the effect is quite different when they appear in such numbers and are arranged in blocks to give colourful effects. It is particularly strange, for example, to see the doctors and nurses from the Hualien hospital arrayed in serried ranks, moving in step. As is traditional in the context of celebrating his birth, the Buddha is here represented standing as a boy newly born; there are many small statues of him within the arena and they are the focus of coordinated acts of homage, such as offering candles. Most of the homage, however, is directed towards the Master, who is worshipped by the entire assembly as if she were a Buddha (or Guan Yin?) herself.

How are we to interpret this development? For most of its existence, Tzu Chi has not celebrated or even marked Buddhist festivals. However, its core members are Buddhists, and it is not surprising if they have felt this as a lack. The aesthetics of the movement used to be almost defiantly unostentatious, as symbolised by the grey cassocks worn by the nuns at headquarters, the Abode, as they go about their inconspicuous lives.

² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ChVCyPSeqHg>. In English the film is entitled "Buddha Day Celebration".

To the outsider who comes upon this great spectacle as a visitor from the wider world, it calls to mind nothing so much as a vast military parade, a march past the supreme commander. But the participants would surely reject this analogy, perhaps resent it. They might even deny that there is anything new going on here. The novelty lies, after all, not in things verbally expressed but in the aesthetics and the emotional tone.

This is a Confucian society, in which regimentation and display are often prized. Moreover, it has been clear throughout the history of the movement that one of its most notable features and greatest strengths is the Master's talent for organization. In this culture, disciplined behaviour does not necessarily suggest militarism; in this context, it is surely intended to evoke Buddhist self-control.

As we have written, "Guan Yin is the Bodhisattva from whom Master Cheng Yen draws her inspiration. Tzu Chi members' devotion to the Master means that they take her as the embodiment of Guan Yin Bodhisattva."³ We have also recorded how some Tzu Chi members believe "that Master Cheng Yen is an embodied divinity", and she is said "to respond to members' distant prayers".⁴ Indeed some see her as a messiah who has vowed to return to this world and saved many lives.⁵ In our article "A Radical Buddhism" we later wrote: "there is also a fascinating ambiguity, at least among her followers, about her relationship to Guan Yin ...: is the Master some kind of embodiment of Guan Yin, or is Guan Yin merely her model and inspiration?"⁶ This ambiguity is vividly presented in visual form in our book. On p.90 we present a mosaic from Hualien hospital which shows the Buddha as Medicine King (Sanskrit: Bhaiṣajyaguru) ministering to an ill man while monks look on; on the facing page (p.91) we see a more recent picture (1910) of the same scene, in

³ *TTCEB*, p.164.

⁴ *op.cit.*, p.192.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ "A Radical Buddhism" pp.239-240.

which the Buddha has been replaced by Master Cheng Yen.⁷ The same visual message is presented with renewed force by the staging of the Buddha Day celebration.

We learn from the sociology of religion that as the years pass a sect may gradually drift into becoming a denomination: the original distinctive features become less emphasised and the boundaries which assert the sect's uniqueness are somewhat blurred. A crucial stage in this process is often reached with a change of leadership, and in particular with the passing of the founding generation. The Master is now 77, and her followers cannot but be aware that her reign will come to an end, and great changes may therefore be round the corner. It is too early to make predictions, and it would be foolish to guess what Tzu Chi will look like in ten or fifteen years' time. However, it seems relevant to note that until now Tzu Chi has kept itself very much to itself: it has avoided appearing side by side with other forms of Buddhism in Taiwan, and in particular maintained its distance from the monks who have always been so important in other Buddhist movements in Chinese history. One could even argue that the fact that it has no monks is Tzu Chi's single most distinctive feature. Inviting Buddhist monks to the movement's birthday party may look like a trivial matter, but we suggest that it may prove symptomatic of bigger changes.

Over the past year (2014) there have been some adverse public reactions to Tzu Chi, and doubts cast on its religious mission. For about ten years the Movement has systematically collected recyclable goods from the streets, and then resold or recycled most of them. For example, plastic bottles have been turned into blankets. A certain Da Sheng Tong criticised this in his Facebook entry. He claimed that the project to recycle plastic had been a disaster for many of the poorest households, because when parents lost their jobs, it was only the grandparents scavenging for rubbish in the streets who provided any

⁷That Guan Yin may appear as a particular Buddha or divine being is perfectly normal in Mahayana Buddhism; divine identities are not so clear-cut.

income to support the children. His view evoked a huge number of messages in support.⁸

The Movement's policy is "to teach the rich and to save the poor". On the other hand, Tzu Chi has been the first religious group in Taiwan to establish a club for executive entrepreneurs (called *zongyu dongshi* 榮譽董事). A member of this club, the most successful manufacturer of instant noodles, Wei Yin-chong (魏應充) has recently been prosecuted for allegedly using for decades oil which had already been used previously, some of which was even poisonous. This case is likely to do serious damage to a large part of the Taiwanese food industry. While it is obviously unfair to hold Tzu Chi responsible for this, it has grave repercussions for the Movement's reputation.⁹

⁸<http://www.ettoday.net/news/20140416/347236.htm>

⁹<http://www.my-formosa.com/article.aspx?cid=5&id=68530>