Taiwan’s Tzu Chi as Engaged Buddhism: Origins, Organization, Appeal and Social Impact, by Yu-Shuang Yao

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which state power is being exercised in every sphere of life in China today. More importantly, it closes off questions such as how lalas are thinking about, making sense of and responding to the ways in which they are being constructed in public discourses on health, in the legal arena and even within academia. My impression is that a more nuanced approach towards conceptualizing how the Chinese state is exercising its power in everyday life and particularly in regulating the institution of the family would be more productive in grounding the politics of being gay within the context of China’s economic transformation.

These weaknesses do not detract from the fact that Shanghai Lalas is a compassionate and sensitive reading into the concerns, struggles and compromises of a long-silenced group of women. Its strength also lies in the incorporation of and critical engagement with Chinese sources on the study of sexuality in reform-era China. This book will be of interest to students of gender, the family and China.

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Yu-Shuang Yao’s book is a sociological study of Tzu Chi, founded by Master Cheng Yen in 1966 and now one of the largest and most significant Buddhist groups active in Taiwan. Yao terms Tzu Chi a New Religious Movement (NRM). Drawing strongly on her doctoral thesis, submitted at King’s College, London, in 2001, her book’s data is drawn from 31 interviews and a survey of 1,214 members. Acknowledging the lag between thesis submission and book publication, Yao notes that a decade ago publishers did not think that there was any market for a book on contemporary Chinese religion. This is a shame, as Yao’s research would have been even more valuable than it is now. Except for the four-page afterword, the book does not appear to have evolved greatly from the thesis. The addition of further qualitative data could have given the study a longitudinal aspect useful in gauging the evolution of Tzu Chi and how it has managed to appeal to, attract and retain followers. That said, Yao does provide several important insights into this striking example of religious innovation.

Yao structures her book in a straightforward manner. Besides outlining the aims of her study, the introduction includes the requisite survey of religion in contemporary Taiwan. This section is highlighted by the six pages that she devotes to Japanese New Religious Movements (NRM: as Yao labels them, JNRMs),
in Taiwan. This short section is tantalizing, and one hopes that Yao will be able to devote more research to the topic in the future. As she says, the secular nature of JNRMs in Taiwan somewhat resembles Tzu Chi, a strongly secular Buddhist group. I am not aware of other English-language scholarship on how Japanese religion has influenced NRM in Taiwan, and this is valuable as it is important to look beyond Taiwanese, Chinese or Western influences in this respect.

In her literature review, Yao locates her study of Tzu Chi as part of research on NRM. She reviews three doctoral theses and one MPhil dissertation that deal with Tzu Chi. Unfortunately, she does not include C. Julia Huang’s *Charisma and Compassion: Cheng Yen and the Buddhist Tzu Chi Movement* (Harvard University Press, 2009), saying that it was published too late for consideration and “in any case her approach is so different from mine that our work barely overlaps” (p. 37, n.73). Richard Madsen’s *Democracy’s Dharma: Religious Renaissance and Political Development in Taiwan* (University of California Press, 2007) is also ignored.

The second chapter is “Research Approach and Methods”. Like the literature review, the routine aspects of this chapter are offset by a shorter and fresher addition. In this case, Yao describes the difficulties that she encountered when attempting to forge contacts with Tzu Chi and establish herself as a trustworthy interlocutor. Yao’s frank recollection of her difficulties in maintaining her academic position while ingratiating herself with her informants will be of interest to anyone who has conducted similar fieldwork, and will provide useful tips for younger researchers preparing to enter the field for the first time. Likewise, Tzu Chi’s tendency to direct her towards certain informants needs to be considered when examining Yao’s results.

In the third chapter, Yao discusses the history of Tzu Chi and the charismatic authority of Cheng Yen. She augments a range of primary and secondary historical documents by sampling three decades of media coverage from Taiwan and China.

The rest of the book is comprised of Yao’s ethnographic data. Chapter 4 looks at the teachings and practices of morality and altruism, Chapter 5 discusses the (primarily middle class) social structure of Tzu Chi, Chapter 6 explains recruitment strategy, Chapter 7 offers insights on Tzu Chi’s organizational structure and Chapter 8 analyzes the appeal of Tzu Chi. These five chapters are greatly enhanced by snippets of interviews with Tzu Chi adherents. These interviews allow us to explore some of the very heartfelt and personal motivations that adherents express when discussing their participation.

In Chapter 9, Yao asks: “Does Tzu Chi meet the expectations of current sociological theory?” Unsurprisingly, her answer is: “Broadly, yes” (p. 213). Utilizing the work of established NRM scholars from the Western academy, such as Rodney Stark, William Sims Bainbridge, Bryan Wilson and Karel Dobelaere, Yao’s argument perhaps owes more to her original thesis than she admits. Had she taken the opportunity to rework it thoroughly, her rich ethnographic material
and knowledge of Tzu Chi would have been even better employed. One can hope that Yao develops these ideas in future research.

It is unfortunate that an otherwise valuable study is hobbled by some woeful subediting. It appears that whoever was responsible was not familiar with elementary aspects of Taiwanese history and geography, or the Chinese language. Readers will be alerted to this as soon as they read the acknowledgements, where Tainan (a major city and former capital) is rendered as “Taiana”. It is unfair to pin such a sloppy mistake on Yao, a native of Taiwan. Inconsistent and inaccurate romanization appears from time to time and, while those familiar with the intricacies of the Chinese language will be able to shrug this aside, those relying on English translation of these names and terms will have some difficulties.

Yao’s perseverance in publishing her work is admirable. *Taiwan’s Tzu Chi as Engaged Buddhism* offers a thorough account of this NRM in the 1990s, and will be of interest to researchers of religion in Taiwan and of NRMs more broadly.

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As an official organ of the Chinese Communist Party, China Central Television enjoys a remarkable position among the world’s media. With its provocative “two billion eyes”, the title of Ying Zhu’s book captures this, though the closest that we seem to come to that figure in the text is a claim that “roughly two-thirds of all television hours in China are spent watching CCTV shows” (p. 196). We are told later that 842 million people tuned to CCTV for the opening of the Beijing Olympics in 2008 (p. 250), so I wonder what the remaining half-billion of the potential audience were doing. On another page, we learn in passing that “CCTV only occupies 38 percent of the Chinese TV market” (p. 117). The catchy title sets the tone of the book, a mix of academic writing, journalism and personal exploration. It provides fascinating insights into some of the personalities who have driven the popularity of CCTV in the past quarter-century, but it falls short in a number of dimensions, particularly by not placing CCTV developments in a fuller media, political and social context.

The book’s strengths are obvious. In 2008 and 2009 Zhu managed to interview several on-screen stars of CCTV, including the suave current-affairs host Bai Yansong and (briefly) the over-the-top game-show host Li Yong. She also spoke with some of the men responsible for the management of the channel or news division, notably Yang Weiguang, who moved from central radio to CCTV.