# 1 Engaged Religions, Industrialized Philanthropy, and the Social Life of Goodness

In the early 1990s one of us flew to Taiwan as part of a delegation invited by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Mixed in among visits to politicians and think tanks in Taipei, the Ministry brought us to what appeared to be a small temple in Hualian on Taiwan's poor eastern coast. We were there to visit a Buddhist nun, the Ven. Cheng Yen (证严), at the Still Thoughts Abode, the headquarters of her Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi (慈济) Foundation.[1] Sitting in a small, quiet courtyard in front of a typical temple hall, the group had a long talk with her about Buddhism and charity. She was soft-spoken, and no one interrupted the serenity of the occasion. The temple appeared, at least at first, no different from many other old-fashioned Buddhist temples urging people to follow the bodhisattva path of helping others.

The surprise that followed came not so much from talking with Cheng Yen as from a serendipitous glance through a partially open door on our way out. Sitting inside were rows and rows of young women, each clicking away at a computer terminal and entering information about donations. Suddenly it became clear that this was not an ordinary temple, nor did the group represent Buddhism as usual. In retrospect, the enormous parking lot was already a clue that something quite different was happening here.

At that time, none of us knew much about Tzu Chi, nor had any of us begun to think about the topic of this book. In fact, however, the group was in the midst of an extremely rapid development, already well on its way to gaining the millions of followers in countries all around the world that it would have by the end of the decade. With its huge corps of volunteers, Tzu Chi would soon be the largest nongovernmental organization (NGO) in Taiwan, and a major actor in Taiwanese and global health care, emergency aid, and poverty relief.

[1] We use pinyin as the default for all romanization from Mandarin. We make exceptions when groups or individuals have established a different convention in English (as with Cheng Yen or Tzu Chi), which we follow. Where there are already alternate conventions in English (which is especially common in Malaysia, e.g., Cheng Hoon Teng), we follow those conventions. In general, we use Chinese characters instead of pinyin, but make exceptions for some terms that we prefer not to translate.

This brief visit raised many of the questions that inform this book. Why would a charity-based Buddhist movement expand so very rapidly at this historical moment? Why would the Ministry of Foreign Affairs think that such a place should be highlighted for foreign visitors? What kinds of ideas had to change for this form of Buddhism to be able to shape itself around the production efforts of millions of people volunteering to do good, and the backstage construction of massive computer banks?

As we will see, Tzu Chi was by no means unique. Our interest in religious charity began with a much broader ethnographic puzzle that extended across our field research with Chinese people in mainland China, Taiwan, and Malaysia: beginning in the late twentieth century and continuing today, religions undertook a far more active role in providing public goods in each of these communities (and many others) than they had earlier in the twentieth century. Why?

Much (though not all) of this new activity took a form that we might call "industrialized philanthropy."[2] We use this term to indicate three related phenomena. First, the scale was large, in some cases larger than ever before in Chinese history, involving millions of people all around the world. Second, the production and distribution of philanthropic goods were increasingly rationalized and bureaucratized in ways that included accounting methods, reporting responsibilities to boards of directors, recruitment and organization of members, uses of the media, and above all relations with governments. Finally, such philanthropy became disembedded from local social life and personal social connections, and relied instead on a new sense of self as something able to make autonomous and independent decisions, which are rooted in transnational and cosmopolitan notions of universal goodness. Such a self could materialize those values through voluntary donations of time and money. This notion of selfhood, seen as both universal and autonomous, parallels the shaping of identity documented in industrialized societies since the classic work of Max Weber and Émile Durkheim. That initial quick trip to Tzu Chi's Still Thoughts Abode showed all of these characteristics.

Of course, much of the literature about philanthropy focuses on precisely such industrialized forms, to the point that their goals, organizational structures, and notions of identity seem universal and natural. They sometimes seemed natural to our informants as well, such as when they talked about "doing good" (行善 or 做善事) as if it included only things like poverty relief, education, or medical care to needy strangers. As we hope to show, however, there is nothing natural about this notion of goodness or its organizational carriers. It is the historical product of a particular moment.

[2] We are grateful to Elisabeth Clemens for suggesting this term.

There are many other ways of conceptualizing and responding to human need. For earlier generations and in other contexts, doing good in Chinese societies could equally mean helping educate only the sons of one's lineage, providing burial services for fellow immigrants, releasing animals from captivity, collecting and ritually burning scraps of writing, or conducting rituals to appease the dead souls that ensue after war or natural disaster. Industrialized philanthropy typically includes none of these things. Ideas about goodness have their own social and historical lives, and our goal here is to understand how and why those ideas and their organizational forms began to trend toward the industrialization of philanthropy in multiple Chinese societies, especially beginning in the 1980s.

At first glance the prospects for socially engaged Chinese religions appear discouraging. No religious tradition has an important formal political role in any current Chinese society, and the twentieth century brought repression of many forms of religion. Until very recently, religions in Chinese societies also never created national-scale private institutions to provide such goods, with the partial exception of Christians during the brief missionary heyday of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[3] As we will discuss, religions had actually long been involved in various aspects of "the good" in Chinese history, but this was challenged in the twentieth century by massive secularization projects that tried to reduce religion to spiritual functions alone, and by changing notions of goodness that made many of those earlier activities seem irrelevant. By the 1980s, however, in each of the different political systems we will examine, the most radical secularizing trends began to reverse, and religions found ways to accommodate changing notions of goodness.

This has been most obvious in China, where the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) reduced public religious activity to almost nothing. The state was to be the only significant public actor and there was no place for religious charity, or even for religion. By the 1990s, however, not only had religion surged anew almost everywhere, but temples, churches, and mosques again supplied all kinds of public goods. They built museums, arboreta, schools, and old age homes. They have been active in emergency relief as well, most remarkably after the devastating Sichuan earthquake of 2008.

Taiwan never had as severe a repression of religion as the mainland, but the change there too was almost as striking. When one of us first conducted field research in Taiwan in the late 1970s, temples provided no direct social services, although they quite obviously concentrated some basic social capital. Nevertheless, the situation today looks very different. Enormous new Buddhist organizations have built universities and hospitals. The Tzu Chi

[3] Nevertheless, a widely diverse array of engaged religious activities existed throughout the late imperial period. We review some of these in Chapter 2.

Foundation, mentioned in our opening anecdote, has been especially successful at delivering medical and emergency aid all around the world. Even local temples to gods are taking on a far wider range of social activities than they had several decades earlier. They typically provide scholarships for local students, arrange emergency aid for needy families, and donate garbage trucks and fire engines to their local governments. The dynamics of these changes have been rather different from what happened on the mainland, but they have been just as rapid.

Malaysia, which had by far the longest colonial history among our field sites, nevertheless felt the least pressure for religion to adjust to Western models. In some ways it maintained more features of late imperial religious organization, though with significant adjustments for the Chinese population in Malaysia as members of an ethnic minority. Dutch and British colonial rulers used forms of indirect rule, which actually reinforced the role of temples and their leaders in the local Chinese communities. It also encouraged temples to retain more of their traditional forms of social engagement than happened in Taiwan or China under all their twentieth-century regimes. Post-independence policies to protect Islam and to keep clear lines of separation among ethnic groups encouraged Chinese temples to continue meeting broader social needs. Only in the last few decades has the government allowed more space for organizations to move out of an ethnically Chinese bunker, and only with limited success so far, as we will discuss.

## Goodness

Religious actors involved in charity work in all three of our field sites used very similar languages of industrialized philanthropy to describe their goals and organizational structures. Given their deep differences in political structures and social histories, this was unexpected. The various religious traditions (Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity, Islam, temple-based worship) themselves add further layers of significant variation in the potential forms and structures of "goodness," but most of our informants downplayed this too, at least at first. Instead they seemed to share the broad moral outlook that characterizes much of the literature on modern philanthropy everywhere in the world: philanthropy should, for instance, include medical clinics, but not the laying on of hands; burying the dead, but not caring for their lost souls; monitoring and aiding the poor, but not giving handouts to beggars. It should be both counted and accountable. We found this equally in our interviews with Christians and Buddhists, democrats and communists. This image of goodness, however, is not inherently natural, and is a relatively recent development in each of our cases, as we will discuss in the chapters that follow. Goodness, that is, has its own social life.

That social life has moved from the late nineteenth century when Buddhists inspired "benevolent halls" (善堂), Catholics specialized in orphanages, and everyone helped primarily people with whom they already had existing social connections. By the middle of the twentieth century (especially on the mainland) religion did very few of these activities. In the contemporary era engaged religions had changed again, so that all religions now deliver similar packages of medical aid, emergency relief, and education to a universal public of those in need. Volunteering has become a core idea to bring followers into these activities, implying a new kind of relationship between religion and follower, between philanthropic organization and the public, and between self and society. Organizational transparency has changed from temples posting names of large donors on their walls to modern accounting systems subject to audit by various state agencies.

The convergence toward industrialized philanthropy is certainly not hegemonic, however, and began to dominate engaged religions in our regions starting only from the 1980s. Before that, we saw far greater differences from one political system to another and from one religious tradition to another. One of our primary goals is to understand how this partial convergence became so strong in the late twentieth century, but also to keep an eye on those aspects of engaged religion that have been able to resist the trend.

We will argue that the contemporary image of goodness is by no means the universal truth that most people involved in these engaged religions (and in secular NGOs as well) seem to take as natural and obvious. It is instead a social construction, uniquely shaped by the times and spaces in which it spread. Our primary concern is thus with the evolving social life of goodness. In that sense we are contributing to what Joel Robbins has recently described as an anthropology of the good, which may offer ways of "helping us do justice to the different ways people live for the good, and finding ways to let their efforts inform our own."[4]

In taking this position, we are aligning ourselves with an anthropological approach that sees morality as something multiple, contextual, and constructed.[5] The world of religious philanthropy in China involves a commitment that, for most people, goes beyond and (for many) seeks to counteract the moral implications of their everyday lives. Such people fit easily with James Laidlaw's definition of ethical conduct as shaped by their "attempts to make of themselves a certain kind of person, because it is as such a person that, on reflection, they think they ought to live."[6]

[4] Robbins, "Beyond the Suffering Subject," 459.
[5] See, for example, Robbins, *Becoming Sinners*; Oxfeld, *Drink Water, but Remember the Source*.
[6] Laidlaw, "For an Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom," 327.

A language of moral breakdown has become very common in China as an explanation for everything from high-level corruption to undergraduates who do not study hard – although it is also important to recall that almost every important Confucian movement since the beginning has also been phrased as an antidote to moral breakdown.[7] Similarly, the anthropology of morality has recently begun to focus on moral breakdowns as privileged zones to provide a view of people's ethical agency.[8] Moral breakdowns involve a crisis that forces people to call their moral assumptions into question. A contrasting approach, however, involves looking at the ethical worlds that people simply take for granted during their everyday lives – an experiential morality rather than a discursive one. For our purposes, however, the distinction between moral breakdowns and experiential morality may be overdrawn, because most of the actions of everyday life can put ethical assumptions at risk. Any action contains the potential to call our moral assumptions into question. Much current ethical discourse thus continues without a strong sense of breakdown, especially in the worlds of engaged religion that we are examining.

One final theme we share with the recent literature on morality is its concern with the politics of modern states. Both the worlds of NGOs and of religions are often imagined as independent from politics, and they often present themselves in such terms as well. Nevertheless, this is deeply problematic both for religions and NGOs, especially when we try to understand them historically in Chinese societies.

On the side of religion, it is important to remember that the modern Chinese term for religion (宗教) is only about a century old, having been coined in Japan to translate the English word "religion" and its equivalents in other European languages. It was brought to China from there. This coincided with state secularization projects, especially under the Guomindang (GMD, also sometimes abbreviated as KMT) in China and Japanese colonial rule in Taiwan, which sought to remove religion from political and broader social life. In the process of limiting religion to the realm of the spiritual, of course, this project also required the creation of "religion" as a category.[9] Understood in roughly Protestant terms as something based around belief (rather than ritual), inscribed in sacred texts, and organized around voluntary congregations, this new slot for religion fit only uneasily in the Chinese social world. Islam and Christianity worked well enough, but Buddhism and Daoism undertook some significant institutional adjustment to make the change. Other potential

[7] Yan Yunxiang provides the most ethnographically grounded such argument; see Yan, *Private Life under Socialism*.
[8] See, for example, Zigon, "Moral Breakdown and the Ethical Demand."
[9] Many scholars have recently pointed to these processes, which have been documented especially clearly in Goossaert and Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China*, 2011.

candidates, such as Confucianism or the temple-based religion that characterized so much of local Chinese life, remained outside the system and were often condemned as outmoded and (especially for temple religion) superstitious. Until these changes of the twentieth century, aspects of what we now call religion pervaded all parts of life, including those organizations dedicated to meeting the welfare needs of the general population. The idea of a distinctly *religious* philanthropy is modern in China, but acts of worship and of charity have long been interlinked.

Any assumption that there is something apolitical about the NGO side of philanthropy is equally problematic, as several contributors to the anthropology of morality have pointed out. Peter Redfield, for example, writes that even "antipolitics," meaning the nongovernmental sector that self-consciously avoids state control (like his primary case of Doctors Without Borders) "faces political judgment, under which mere charity can never be enough."[10] Writing in the same volume, Didier Fassin says:

> The presence of a moral vocabulary in political discourses is definitely not new and one could even ague that politics, especially in democracies, has always included moral arguments about good government and public good, fairness and trust, as well as moral condemnation of all sorts of evil. Yet, the current moralization of politics as a global phenomenon imposing its moral obviousness should be regarded as an object of inquiry in its own right.[11]

That is, for both of these authors, even "private" moralities have inevitable political consequences, just as politics has moral consequences. Furthermore, these mutual shapings of goodness have intimate ties to what Redfield calls "historically liberal expectations of personhood, biopolitical norms of health, and secular understandings of the frame of moral action."[12]

Much of our argument is about how the moral and institutional structures of industrialized philanthropy – something similar to what Redfield is pointing to – have come to dominate religious (and other) charity, although we will turn toward the end of the book to alternative ideas of goodness that continue to provide an important counterpoint. As we will discuss in the chapters that follow, this approach leads to important implications for theories of globalization, social capital, and state–society relations.

## Timing

Most people agree that free markets alone do not work very effectively to solve certain kinds of human problems, such as education, elderly care, medical care,

[10] Redfield, "Humanitarianism," 454.
[11] Fassin, "Introduction: Toward a Critical Moral Anthropology," 10.
[12] Redfield, "Humanitarianism," 464.

or disaster relief. Nor have markets ever been the sole solution to the psychological challenges of death, suffering, or injustice. Instead, we find a major role for the nonmarket institutions of society – the family and other very personal networks, the state, and intermediate social institutions such as religious groups or NGOs.

Before the 1980s Taiwan's autocratic regime tended to emphasize the core role of the family in dealing with these problems. The state there dedicated its efforts to military affairs and economic development, and generally left social issues to be worked out on their own. At the same time, many intermediate social organizations were discouraged because an independent society could foster political problems for the regime. This left the family as the chief actor, with the state providing mostly moral support in the form of reiterations and reworkings of Confucian family values.

Mainland China during this period discouraged intermediate social organizations even more powerfully. Its answer to welfare needs, however, emphasized the state far more than the family. It was the state that guaranteed employment, health, and retirement, especially for urban workers. The most radical moments, such as the communal food preparation and child care of the Great Leap Forward (1958–1961), undermined even basic functions of the family. During those periods, Confucian values became objects of attack instead of propaganda priorities.[13]

Of our field sites, only Malaysia encouraged social organizations to deal with welfare issues directly, although, as we will discuss, those efforts were bunkered into ethnic and religious enclaves. In the last few decades of the twentieth century, however, we can see a steady increase in the role that religious organizations played in addressing problems of social well-being on a large scale, and a steady industrialization of philanthropy. Our study explores the nature and timing of the change in China, Malaysia, and Taiwan. Our comparative approach allows us to ask whether the particular religious tradition makes any difference, and how varying political systems influence the ways that religions engage with society.

What caused one very particular image of goodness and its form of institutionalization to dominate in diverse Chinese societies beginning in the late twentieth century? Part of the answer lies in events that affected all three of our field sites roughly simultaneously. First, all three places experienced rapid economic growth at that time. The 1980s marked the beginning of the market reforms in China, and thus the beginning of a long period of rapid growth, above all in the lower Yangzi region on which our study focuses. It was also the decade in which people began to refer to Taiwan's economy as "developed"

[13] For a summary of relevant policy changes in China and Taiwan, see Laliberté, "Religions and Philanthropy in Chinese Societies Since 1978."

instead of just developing, and during which Malaysia also experienced rapid economic improvement. These changes do not automatically lead to an increase in religious philanthropy, or to large-scale philanthropy of any kind. They do, however, make such action possible by increasing disposable incomes enough that charities have a stable source of donations, and by freeing some people from labor sufficiently to volunteer their time.

Second, both mainland China and Taiwan experienced a significant political loosening during this period, as they ceased acting as symbols for the two sides of a Cold War that would soon disappear. Although they remain very different from each other – one an electoral democracy and the other a single-party state – the changes in both cases fostered a greatly increased space for social organizations of all sorts, including the ones we focus on here. Malaysia's political system did not change as clearly during the period, but did see a strengthening of the affirmative action policies that favored Malays over Chinese, and whose effects included encouraging the Chinese community to rely on its own resources. Thus in very different ways and for different reasons, all of our cases saw an increased role for social organizations in general and philanthropies in particular during this period.

Third, crucial technological changes beginning in the late twentieth century greatly eased communication. This had a wide range of indirect effects on religious philanthropy. It became much easier to know what organizations were doing elsewhere and what successful groups considered to be best practices. It also became possible to organize people and to raise funds in new, more flexible ways instead of relying on word of mouth or the mail.

Fourth, mobility also greatly increased during this period. This includes both international population flows and internal migration. To some extent, as we will discuss, international flows were direct carriers of religious philanthropic institutions, renewing ties among Malaysia, Taiwan, and the Chinese mainland that had been important through the early twentieth century, but that had greatly declined during half a century of Cold War and limited resources. Internal mobility, especially from the countryside to cities, probably had an even greater influence in fostering the attitudes and senses of self that accompany industrialized philanthropy. This is primarily because such mobility disembedded people from rural communities and their strong webs of social connection, encouraging them instead toward looser networks (facilitated by new forms of communication), a more autonomous sense of self, and new kinds of religious activities.

In the chapters that follow, we will explore three primary dimensions of these changes and their timing: political variation and the processes of what we call political merit-making as they have evolved across our field sites (Chapters 2 and 3); the effects of multiple waves of globalization (including both migration and new forms of communication), especially as they have encouraged

people to develop a new sense of self and of the good, which we will call "civic selving" (Chapter 4); and the way the changes of the 1980s and beyond helped encourage innovation in forms of religious philanthropy and in conceptions of the good, creating new sets opportunities and limits that shaped the development of the field (Chapters 5 and 6). We will return in Chapter 7 to the problem of alternative views of goodness – ideas of the good that challenge, accommodate, and coexist with the universalizing and industrializing model that has tended to dominate. Let us expand very briefly on each approach here, but leave most of the relevant discussion to the chapters that follow.

### Changing Regimes and Political Merit-making

Some work suggests that social organizations take over when the state fails to provide needed social services. This "state failure hypothesis" argues that the nongovernmental service sector (including engaged religions) moves in when states are unable to meet their people's needs. None of our cases involve weak states in a literal sense, however. These states are not without problems, but are fiscally strong and preside over relatively successful economies. An alternate route to the rise of social organizations providing welfare, more relevant to our cases, is "state retrenchment." This can occur when states choose to contract their welfare activities on the basis of principle, as in the United States under Ronald Reagan, or the more recent West European contraction of the welfare state in many countries.

In China, the state today certainly provides fewer social goods than it did before the reform era that began in 1979. The change occurred partly for fiscal reasons, but primarily because of China's move to embrace market mechanisms instead of central planning for many aspects of life. Education and medical care, for example, rely on free market processes now in China more than in many other countries. Public services thus offer an arena in which NGOs, including religious ones, can earn the support of the state by providing for social needs. Before democratization, Taiwan offered a comparable space, mostly because its developmentalist state was unwilling to divert resources into welfare functions.[14] Indeed, this is exactly the niche that initially allowed for the growth of Tzu Chi and other forms of Buddhist charity. After democratization, Taiwan has actually moved in an opposite direction to some extent, as many politicians began to support increased state welfare spending as a way of pleasing the electorate. The end result is a roughly similar mix in both places, but through quite different mechanisms. Only Malaysia showed little

[14] The usual term of retrenchment, of course, may be a misnomer for this, because this state had never been invested in providing these services. It was instead a kind of neoliberal regime, before this term was widely used.