

Article

Sacred Secularities: Ritual and Social Engagement in a Global Buddhist China

Jens Reinke

East Asian Institute, Leipzig University, Augustusplatz 10, 04109 Leipzig, Germany; jens.reinke@uni-leipzig.de

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Abstract: The Taiwanese order Fo Guang Shan is a major representative of *renjian* Buddhism. The order maintains a global network of over 200 temples and practice centers that spans over not only most of the Asian continent, but also includes Oceania, the Americas, Europe and Africa. This article examines how the order negotiates the modern secular/religious divide by considering the example of its flagship diaspora temple Hsi Lai Temple in L.A., California. Particular attention is given to two prevalent religious practices at the temple—ritual and social engagements—that are often associated with the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular’ respectively. Based on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork, the article aims to assess the relationship between the two practices and discusses how they resonate with a new generation of highly educated, affluent Chinese migrants.

Keywords: religiosity; secularity; Global East; Taiwan; China; Fo Guang Shan; diaspora temple

1. Introduction

Surrounded by greenery and build on a quiet hillside in an unincorporated suburban community of Los Angeles County lies a brightly colored Chinese Buddhist temple. This Temple, Hsi Lai Temple *xilai si* 西寺 or ‘Coming West Temple’ in English, is one of the biggest Chinese temples in the US and serves as the North American headquarters of the modernist Han Buddhist order Fo Guang Shan 佛光山 (Budda’s Light Mountain). The Buddhist tradition promoted by Fo Guang Shan is *renjian* 人 or Humanistic Buddhism.¹ It is a modern Buddhist tradition with its roots in late 19th and early 20th century China that has become Buddhist mainstream in Taiwan today (Long 2000). Fo Guang Shan is one of the biggest promoters of this tradition, not only in Taiwan but on a global scale, and while different groups have adapted different interpretations of *renjian* Buddhism, one of the primary characteristics of this modern tradition is a new esteem for society, or, in other words, the sphere of ‘the secular’.

‘The secular’ as a concept is often studied in the context of Western Europe or North America. One example for this approach is Charles Taylor’s seminal work ‘A Secular Age’ (Taylor 2007). In this work, Taylor challenges what he calls the ‘subtraction theory’ of secularization, understood as a process where religion disappears in order to be replaced by science and rationality. Instead, he links the development of a secular age to increasingly anthropocentric worldviews that arose from the Reformation.

More recently, scholars have included non-Western settings in their considerations (e.g., Dean and van der Veer 2018). In the edited edition, Jose Casanova emphasizes the concurrency of the birth of secularism within Europe and the global colonial encounters of the early modern era

¹ *Renjian fojiao* is often translated by its adherents as “Humanistic Buddhism”; however, in English, the term “humanistic” contains strong connotations of Renaissance humanism. In order to clarify the distinction between the two, I have adopted the romanized Chinese term.

(Casanova 2018). Earlier, Talal Asad has called for the development of an ethnography of the multiple articulations and consequences of secularism in different time space settings (Asad 2003).

Jessica L. Main and Rongdao Lai have considered the development of modernist Buddhist movements in the light of the modern religious/secular divide (Main and Lai 2013). In an attempt to highlight the linkages and continuities between pre- and post-World War II forms of Buddhist social engagements, they provide a revised definition of Socially Engaged Buddhism. Building on Talal Asad, Main and Lai point out that in modern China the secular and religious as political ideologies have been mutually constitutive categories that are imported from the West. Secularization in this context is understood as the “the exercise of power on the part of secular polities to distinguish between the secular and religious in ways that undermine the resources and moral legitimacy of religious actors with the secular” (p. 4). They argue that Socially Engaged Buddhism, including *renjian* Buddhism, constitutes the “mirror image of secularization” since it understands social involvement within the secular sphere of society as essentially religious (p. 4). Thus, more than any particular political agenda, be it prewar nationalism or postwar pacifism, it is social activity in itself as a form of religious practice that constitutes the core of Socially Engaged Buddhism. This new revised definition makes it possible to include, amongst other groups, Chinese and Taiwanese *renjian* Buddhists under the category.

This article examines how Fo Guang Shan negotiates the modern secular/religious divide within the framework of a ‘Global China’² (consisting of the Peoples Republic of China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, the Chinese diasporas in South East Asia and worldwide, and their dynamic interplay). It does so by considering two prevalent religious practices at the Hsi Lai Temple—ritual and social engagements—that are often associated with the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular’ respectively. Since Fo Guang Shan is a highly centralized Buddhist order, religious practices are standardized and there is little difference if one conducts them at the headquarters or in the diaspora. Yet what is different overseas, are the temple visitors. While at a Fo Guang Shan temple in Taiwan most visitors are, not surprisingly, Taiwanese. At the diaspora temple we can find people that origin from all parts of the Chinese-speaking world and even beyond. This article primarily focuses on the Hsi Lai Temple and its entanglements with the complex and pluralistic Chinese diaspora of Los Angeles, California. However, material from other field sites, such as Nan Hua Temple in South Africa, is considered too. The article is based on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews conducted at the Hsi Lai Temple in the US and at the Nan Hua Temple in South Africa, but also considers studies on Chinese migration, diaspora and modern Chinese Buddhism.³

It is important to note that the notion of ‘Chinese’ when used in this article does not refer to a single locality (be it the Peoples Republic of China/PRC, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, or the diasporas of Southeast Asia and worldwide) but to an association with and literacy in a culture that is comprised of (1) origin from certain geographic localities; (2) languages (e.g., Mandarin, Taiwanese, Cantonese etc.); (3) cultural symbols (e.g., Chinese characters); (4) social practices (e.g., like the Mid-Autumn Festival or Lunar New-year) and (5) discourses (e.g., filial piety). For this article, Chineseness is less understood as some kind of ethnic essence but the term refers to an imagined collectivity that allows people at the diasporic temple to use the parlance of “we Chinese”. ‘Chineseness’ is thus applied as a relational concept. When used in this study, the term ‘Chinese’ is used as an umbrella term that will be specified when needed (PRC Chinese, Taiwanese, Hong Kongese, SEA Chinese, sec. gen. Chinese American, etc.).

² The notion of a Global China is based on Yang Fenggang’s conception of the ‘Global East’ (Yang 2018, p. 795).

³ This article is part of my dissertation research, an ethnographical study of the transnational spread of Fo Guang Shan. The study is integrated in a collaborative research consortium at Leipzig University “Processes of Spatialization under the Global Condition” which is funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). Methodical, it is based on multi-sited fieldwork in Taiwan, South Africa, USA, China, Hong Kong and Germany. Most data that is presented in the article is based on ethnographic fieldwork and semi-structured interviews collected at a nine week residence in the US, six of which I have stayed fulltime at the Hsi Lai Temple, in spring 2018. However, it also considers data from a nine week fieldwork stay at Nan Hua Temple in autumn 2017.

2. (Re)Discovering the Secular World as a Field for Buddhist Practice

Humanistic or *renjian* Buddhism constitutes one Buddhist answer to the crisis of Han Buddhism perceived by many Chinese at the turn of the 19th century. China's encounter with Western imperial aggression had led the Chinese of the time to search for reasons for the country's defeat. Han Buddhism, like other traditions, was found as a culprit by many Chinese intellectuals of the late 19th and early 20th century. It was criticized as superstitious, world denying, and a hindrance to the modernization and strengthening of Chinese society. Some Buddhist monastics, most notably Taixu 太, set off to modernize their tradition (Pittman 2001). Instead of the old 'Buddhism of the forests' *conglin fojiao* 林佛教, that was perceived as escapist and withdrawn from society, or a folk Buddhism that was accused of overly focusing on commercialist rituals for the dead, the modernizers aimed to create a Buddhism that emphasizes education and contributes to modern society (Lai 2017). They called it *renjian* Buddhism (*renjian fojiao* 人佛教), or, in English, Buddhism of the human realm, in reference to the Buddhist cosmological subdivision of the world into six realms: the realm of the gods, the half-gods or *asuras* (Sanskrit), the humans, the animals, the hungry ghosts, and the hells. A similar term for this modernist movement is 'human life Buddhism' (*rensheng fojiao* 人生佛教) emphasizing on the importance Buddhism is to have for the living. In Taiwanese scholarship latter is often associated with Taixu, while the term *renjian* Buddhism is attributed to his student Yinshun 印 (Jiang 1990; Yang 2006). Marcus Bingenheimer, on the other hand, argues that Taixu has in fact used both terms and both describe the same phenomenon (Bingenheimer 2007). What matters for this study, however, is that both terms stress the realm of the human world over the realms of the gods, hells and ghosts. By doing so, without denying the existence of the other realms, the modernizers highlighted the new emphasis of the tradition on the world, or, in other words, secular society.

Hsing Yun *Xingyun* 星, the founder of Fo Guang Shan was a student of Taixu and his order is one of the biggest representatives of the tradition today (Chandler 2004). Fo Guang Shan is involved in many spheres of society. In addition to its transnational temple network that spans not only most of the Asian continent, but also includes Oceania, the Americas, Europe and Africa, the order maintains a multitude of secular undertakings (Shi 2016). These include educational institutions that range from kindergartens to universities, a myriad of libraries, teahouses, vegetarian restaurants, bookstores, Buddhist art galleries, as well as mobile medical clinics, an orphanage, retirement homes, translation and publishing center, a daily newspaper, a television station and so on (Foguangshan Zongwu Huiyuan Hui 2008, vols. 3–5). Yet despite being involved in such a broad range of fields, the temple space is always at the center of Fo Guang Shan's global endeavors.

The North American headquarters of Fo Guang Shan, Hsi Lai Temple, is in many ways the organization's paragon overseas temple. Completed in 1988 and located in the Los Angeles San Gabriel Valley, the temple is the first Fo Guang Shan temple in the US. Since 1992, Fo Guang Shan lay Buddhists worldwide are organized at the BLIA (Buddha's Light International Association *guoji foguang hui* 佛光). The BLIA, which has received NGO association status by the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the Department of Public Information in 2003, has its global headquarters established at Hsi Lai Temple (vol. 6). The Los Angeles regional BLIA chapter is probably the biggest overseas chapter of the organization.⁴ While BLIA in the whole of South Africa, for example, has seven regional chapters with altogether about 1000 members, the BLIA regional chapter for the Los Angeles area alone holds 23 sub chapters for approximately 1800 members. In the early days of the Hsi Lai Temple the core of its members were mainly Taiwanese, yet over time a significant number of Cantonese speakers from Hong Kong, Southeast Asia and particularly Vietnam joined the organization. More recently, similar to the situation at other Fo Guang Shan temples worldwide, PRC Chinese membership numbers are on the rise. While most leading positions within the BLIA subchapters are still held by Taiwanese Americans and to a slightly lesser degree by Cantonese speakers,

⁴ The following section is based on fieldwork data.

some subchapters, particularly from the very affluent coastal areas, already have first generation migrants from the PRC in leading positions. Not to mention that, on the monastic side, the current abbot is a PRC Chinese. The temple attracts visitors of all ethnic and national backgrounds, yet the majority are first generation immigrants who are proficient Mandarin speakers (some additionally speak Hokkien, Hakka or Cantonese). Although many BLIA members reside in the US for many decades and are thus fluent in English, Mandarin continues to be the main language of communication at the temple. The predominance of Mandarin is to be understood in regard to demographic changes in the Chinese diaspora that have been occurred since the 1960s.

3. Buddhism in the Ethnoburb

The lay Buddhists one encounters at the Hsi Lai Temple belong to a new generation of affluent, highly educated first generation migrants that are marked by a dual orientation towards the civic society of their new home country and the culture of their regions of origin. Earlier forms of modern Chinese migration that occurred in the 19th and early 20th century were characterized by large scale labor migration from the southern coastal provinces (mainly Guangdong and Fujian) of China (Li and Li 2013). These southern Chinese—who migrated to Southeast Asia, the Americas, Australia, and Africa—were often Cantonese (and Hokkien) speakers. Many of them settled in ethnic inner city enclaves, or Chinatowns, some of which can still be found today (Kwong 1996; Lin 1998; Zhou 2010). However, during the mid of the last century, due to international geopolitical and global economic changes in the second half of the 20th century (including the democratization of the Republic of China/ROC and the political and economic opening of the PRC, in addition to changing national immigration and trade policies in the migration receiving countries, particularly in the United States) the demographics of the Chinese diaspora outside of Asia have changed significantly (Kuhn 2009, chp. 8). While the earlier Chinese labor migrants were often destitute and had received limited education, the Chinese migrants that emigrated after the 1960s possessed a significantly higher socioeconomic background. New migration laws that have been legislated during the second half of the last century in the US attracted highly skilled professionals as well as wealthy migrants who were expected to invest money and thereby create employment for local Americans (Li 2011, pp. 35–38). The new laws also created opportunities for family sponsored migrants and low skill professionals in areas with labor shortage. This resulted in the overseas community becoming more socially stratified, however, many of the new Chinese migrants are highly educated and often wealthy. Wang Gongwu has called this development the “upgrading of Chinese migrants” (Wang 1998). Furthermore, instead of primarily emigrating from the southern Chinese coastal regions, recent Chinese migrants originate from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, and increasingly from all the different provinces of the PRC. In summary, compared to their predecessors, the socioeconomic backgrounds and geographic and national origins of the new Chinese migrants have become notably more diverse.

The diversification of places of origin and the fact that many of the current generation of first generation migrants from the PRC and Taiwan, but also to a lesser degree Southeast Asia, have received national language education in Mandarin have led to an ongoing process of Mandarin replacing Cantonese as the most common language in the Chinese diaspora.⁵ The new spread of Mandarin overseas was accompanied by new modes of settlement. Migrants from Taiwan and Hong Kong were the first who took advantage of the repeal of race-based immigration policies in 1960s and thus represent the vanguard of the new form of Chinese migration. And it was these ‘pioneers’ from Taiwan that facilitated the construction of Fo Guang Shan’s first overseas temples. It is therefore not a coincidence that Hsi Lai Temple is located in a middle class suburban community. Migrating to their new home countries, the new Chinese migrants had also generated new modes of settlement. Instead of settling in the inner city Chinatowns, as their predecessors have done, they moved directly into the

⁵ Mandarin is also called national language *guoyu* in Chinese.

suburbs. They did so in big numbers and over time created sizable suburban Chinese residential and business clusters. While some of the earlier Chinese migrants too had eventually moved upward on the social ladder and thus could afford to move on from the Chinatowns into the suburbs. Yet there they represented only a small minority and were expected to assimilate into the mainstream society. In contrast, the new suburban Chinese residential and business clusters were able to generate spaces for cultural institutions, including religious ones, from their regions of origin. In her study on these clusters in the Los Angeles San Gabriel Valley, the US geographer Wei Li has dubbed this new form of settlement, the ‘ethnoburb’ (Li 2011). In the earlier days, the ethnoburb in the San Gabriel Valley was built by migrants from Taiwan. Later, Hong Kongese and Southeast Asian Chinese also migrated there in increasing numbers. Most recently, from the 2000s on, a rising number arrives from the PRC. There are ethnoburbs not only in Los Angeles, but also in Houston, the San Francisco Bay Area, the suburban New York/New Jersey region, Australia, and New Zealand (Li 2011). Many of these ethnoburbs also host Fo Guang Shan Temples or have Fo Guang Shan temples close by.

It is important to keep in mind the heterogeneous character of the overseas Chinese communities in the US as well as worldwide. The Chinese diasporic experience has generated layered and multiple identities that are constituted by nationality, gender, class and culture, etc. In other words, the Chinese diasporas are what anthropologist Pnina Werbner calls ‘complex diasporas’ (Werbner 2010). She claims that late modern diasporic discourses are multiple and rather than to fuse, they intersect and can be even contradictory. What connects the new diasporas despite their heterogeneity are the shared “cultural preoccupations, tastes, cuisines, music, sport, poetry, fashion and popular cinema” (p. 76) that are appreciated in geographical regions that exceed singular nation states. There might be conflict in the area of origin, yet it is often possible to transcend these tensions in favor for coalitions within the diasporic space (p. 76). This applies to the Hsi Lai Temple too. At the temple, most Taiwanese and PRC Chinese deemphasize the cross-strait tensions between Taiwan and the PRC and instead stress their commonalities by adopting the parlance of ‘we are all Chinese’. This unifying rhetoric also reflects a broader trend of developing new forms of social organization in the diaspora: Instead of the earlier strong focus on native place *xiang*, new forms of social organizing transcend identities based on home province and even national citizenship of origin (Kuhn 2009, pp. 360–64). Hsi Lai Temple and BLIA L.A. represent one religious example of the newly emerging despatialized, non-particularistic forms of organization in the Chinese diaspora. Fo Guang Shan’s new Chinese cosmopolitanism proposes a modern Chinese religiosity, albeit one that is oriented towards social engagements within the secular sphere of society. However, that doesn’t mean that there is no space for more traditional religious practices at Hsi Lai, or any other of the Fo Guang Shan Temples. On the contrary, rituals, like ceremonies for repentance *chanhui* 悔, dharma assemblies *fahui* 法, morning and evening services *zao wan ke* 早晚, etc., play an important role in Fo Guang Shan *renjian* Buddhism.

4. Navigating the Secular/Religious Divide

One of the aims of the early 20th century *renjian* Buddhists was to correct the overly commercialist ritual practice of the past. The critique was primarily directed against the common practice of some monastics to provide on call ritual services for the deceased for cash. Fo Guang Shan responded to the issue by deemphasizing (yet by no means completely abandoning) rituals for the deceased, stressing the benefits of rituals for the living and using ritual as an occasion to provide Buddhist teachings (Xue 2013). The following section discusses two prevalent forms of religious practice at Fo Guang Shan: ritual and volunteer work. Of course there are also other religious practices conducted at the temple, such as copying sutras, meditation, reciting the name of the Buddha Amitabha, etc., but rituals and volunteering are amongst the most popular and attract the biggest number of people. The former is often associated with the sacred, while the latter conventionally belongs to the sphere of the secular.

Xue Yu argues that the reform of rituals by Fo Guang Shan constitute an important factor for the order’s success. He particularly highlights the new focus on pedagogical aims—to teach the Dharma in order to benefit the living—and the revitalization of sacredness achieved through Fo Guang Shan’s

ritual reform. Not surprisingly, at Hsi Lai Temple rituals occupy an important part of the religious schedule.⁶ There are many rituals at the temple, including large scale ones like the Emperor Liang Repentance Service *liang huang bao chan* 梁皇 and even, on very special occasions, the biggest and most elaborate of the Chinese Buddhist rituals: the Water Land Liberation Service *shui lu fahui* 水法. One of the regular rituals at Hsi Lai Temple, one that is conducted monthly, is the Great Compassion Repentance Service *da bei chan fahui* 大悲法. It is praised for cleansing the minds of the devotees and attendance is normally so high that the main shrine is not big enough to hold all the people. Those who do not get one of the popular spots at the feet of the Buddha statues have to make do with a video transmission at a big conference room. The ceremony consists of the introduction and the chanting of the Great Compassion Mantra while seated and while circumambulating through the shrine room. At the end of the ceremony, the names of all the donors are recited and every attendant receives a bottle of water that is blessed through the recitation of the mantra. On its website, the Hsi Lai Temple states:

Some of the merits often associated with the Great Compassion Mantra are: rebirth into higher realms, meeting beneficial acquaintances, having competent facilities, bountiful food and wealth, gaining great respect, and the opportunity to learn Buddhist teachings. Moreover, those who recite this mantra will not suffer death by starvation, disease, poison, flood, or fire. Water blessed with the Great Compassion Mantra is called the Great Compassion Water, and is taken by devotees for its spiritually cleansing qualities.

(Hsi Lai Temple)

From the quote above we can see that at Fo Guang Shan, rituals are understood to be efficacious means for the production of good merit for oneself but also the deceased, e.g., to prolong one's life or to generate a good rebirth, etc. To attribute the capacity to generate merit to ritual performance is of course not a unique feature of Fo Guang Shan, but common in Chinese Buddhism in general. In fact, even the reformer Taixu, despite his reformist agenda, had still acknowledged the efficacy of Buddhist ritual. In his collected works, he outlines the idea of an ideal *renjian* Buddhist temple. At this model temple, dharma assemblies are conducted in order to create merits for the victims of natural disasters that occur worldwide (Taixu 1998, p. 404). Justin Ritzinger too highlights the compatibility of Taixu's modernist approach with more traditional religious goals by showing how the reformer's reinvention of the Maitreya cult connects utopian sentiments of the time to the traditional quest for Buddhahood (Ritzinger 2017).

At Fo Guang Shan, rituals are thought of as efficacious, yet they are reformed in order to adapt to the needs of contemporary Buddhists. Not only are sermons integrated in the ritual in order to provide an opportunity to learn the Buddhist Dharma, but there are other changes too: Most rituals are conducted at the weekend in order to accommodate the working hours of the disciples. The design of the shrine hall, ritual proceedings and rules of conduct are all standardized, making it is easy for any lay Buddhist of the organization at any global branch temple to orient him or herself immediately. In addition, some of the bigger ceremonies even include elaborate cultural or performance elements, like music or special lightning, etc. Xue states: "Therefore, I would argue that the rituals of Humanistic Buddhism have not necessarily desanctified or secularized Buddhism; rather, they have re-created Buddhist tradition and revitalized the idea of the sacred within, bringing the sacred into daily life of adherents and extending religious practice into the public arena." (Xue, pp. 362–63).

At Hsi Lai, most rituals are conducted at the shrine halls of the temple. Thus, within the temple space we can identify a 'spatial hierarchy of sacredness' with the shrine halls being located at the top. This spatial hierarchy is also reinforced through certain rules. While people can take pictures at most places at the temple, the practice is forbidden inside of the shrine halls. Furthermore, during the rituals monastics are positioned in the front, followed by lay Buddhists who have taken refuge and the five

⁶ The following section is based on fieldwork data.

precepts and who are thus allowed to wear the full ritual dress (*haiqing* 海青 and *manyi* 衣) and behind them lay Buddhists who have only taken refuge (and thus only wear a *haiqing* but no *manyi*). In the back come those who wear regular street clothes.

As mentioned above, social engagement and volunteering are seen as forms of religious practice at Fo Guang Shan. During my fieldwork, many monastics have pointed out to me that practices like ritual, meditation, and sutra study are excellent ways to be involved with Buddhism, but what is gained through these practices has to be applied to daily life. This can be practiced best by participating in one of the many volunteer groups at the temple. At Hsi Lai Temple, about 100 volunteers are on duty on an ordinary weekend day. Besides the spaces designated for religious activity, the temple runs a welcome center, a book shop, a dining hall, Chinese-, prep-, and Dharma schools for the young, an orchestra, a teahouse, a publishing house, funeral services and columbarium for the ashes of the deceased, etc. All these endeavors require manpower and the support from the laity. Thus, for Fo Guang Shan Buddhists, volunteer work is the primary space of religious practice. The idea that volunteer work is a form of practice that produces merit for the lay practitioner is, of course, a staple of most if not all forms of Asian Buddhism. But while in more traditional settings volunteer work is often understood as practicing the Buddhist virtue of generosity (*dāna* in Sanskrit), Fo Guang Shan Buddhists also see it as a way to also practice Buddhist qualities like compassion, wisdom and non-self. It is in dealing with other people, through the overcoming of possible conflict that one practices Buddhism most efficiently.

In other words, for Fo Guang Shan Buddhists, while still acknowledging a spatial hierarchy of sacredness where the main shrine is located at the center, the sacred is not something that is separated from the secular, but something that has to be actualized within the secular. To volunteer at the temple is not just a way to contribute and thereby practice *dāna*, but the most efficient way to practice the Buddhist path as a whole. Other Socially Engaged Buddhists who perceive social involvement within secular society as religious activity in itself, often do so at the expense of more ‘traditional’ forms of Buddhist religiosity. This approach may be best represented by another Taiwanese global actor Buddhist, the Tsu Chi Foundation *ciji jijin hui* 慈基金 (Huang 2009). In contrast, Fo Guang Shan reformulates the ‘traditional’ practices of Chinese Buddhism (particularly ritual, but also study, meditation, chanting, etc.) in a contemporary, accessible manner. The sacred, that can be experienced through the more traditional practices, is then to be actualized through volunteer work in the secular sphere. The religious and secular at Fo Guang Shan are thus not clearly separated nor are they completely merged. They permeate each other and have to be continually actualized.

5. Popularizing Chinese Buddhism for a Global World

What makes this kind of Buddhism—a Buddhism that maintains, albeit in a reformed manner, the traditional ritual practice of Chinese Buddhism but also strongly emphasizes social engagement in society—so popular in the Chinese diaspora? Fo Guang Shan is not the only Buddhist order in Taiwan (or the PRC for that matter) that has tried to develop globally, but it is amongst the most successful. When I asked Taiwanese first generation migrants at Hsi Lai Temple why they chose to join Fo Guang Shan, many stressed the difference between the Fo Guang Shan Temple and the many small (often more folk religious than Buddhist) temples of their youth that can be found everywhere on the island. One interviewee said:

We had a temple at the corner of the street where I grew up. It was very dark and there was dust everywhere. My grandma always took me there to pray for good luck, but as a child, I was always very afraid. The Fo Guang Shan temples here are very different. They are bright and colorful, very open and welcoming. Also, the Buddhism practiced here is orthodox [*zhengxin* 正信, added by the author] Buddhism.

(Interview conducted in Chinese; Hsi Lai Temple, US; spring 2018)

In my conversations, similar stories came up over and over again. The Fo Guang Shan temple is often described as a very inviting but also orthodox Buddhist space. The emphasized orthodoxy of

renjian Buddhism is marked by a clear dissociation from folk religion but also linked to discourses of Protestantism as a modern model religion. Many members of the Taiwanese middle class emigrated between the late 1970s and 1990s. Taiwan during this era was in the process of transitioning from a totalitarian to a democratic society. While these decades also saw the blossoming of (especially but not exclusively modernist *renjian*) Buddhism in Taiwan, the official state ideology of the governing KMT was characterized by hostility towards religion (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, p. 214). The atheist state ideology goes back to the Republican Era in China. In order to modernize the country and to defend it from Western and Japanese aggression, Chinese intellectuals, from the early 20th century on begun to apply Western categories of science, religion, and superstition to their traditions (Hammerstrom 2015). While folk religious traditions until today are often framed in terms of superstition, Buddhists did all they could in order to present Buddhism as a modern religion. They did so by stressing that Buddhism is able to contribute to modern project of nation state building (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, p. 82). The debates went on in Taiwan under the martial law period, when Protestantism and Catholicism were the only religions that received special privileges (e.g., founding universities). Showing that Buddhism was as an orthodox and modern religion that was contributing to society was particularly relevant for those Taiwanese who belonged to the middle class (Madsen 2008), and it was mostly the middle and upper classes that could afford to migrate to places like the US. Many Taiwanese perceived the United States of America as the ultimate modern nation state and Protestantism plays a major role in the public life of the country. Carolyn Chen has shown that for many Taiwanese migrants of this generation becoming American meant becoming religious (Chen 2008). Many times that meant becoming Protestant. In fact, the rate of Protestants within the Taiwanese American community is significantly higher than in Taiwan. Thus, for *renjian* Buddhists, it was and continues to be, very important to show that Buddhism is a modern religion. In this context, notions of orthodoxy fulfil the need of *renjian* Buddhists to differentiate their tradition from discourses linked to folk religion and superstition, while at the same time, involvement in charity and education aim at showing at the compatibility of Buddhism with the modern nation state project. Furthermore, within the Chinese diaspora, a modernist religiosity that is involved in charity and education demonstrates the utility of Buddhists to contribute to their host society. Hsi Lai Temple is involved in countless charities: It provides scholarships to local students, donates food for the homeless, organizes days to clean up the community, etc. Fo Guang Shan has even founded a liberal arts university in the Los Angeles San Gabriel Valley. The school has the lowest tuition for a private university in the whole state of California and provides many scholarships for local students from the lower strata of society. Besides maintaining a university, the temple also runs smaller educational institutions like a Dharma schools for kids, and Chinese language and cultural classes.

In a recent article about Christian influences on *renjian* Buddhism, Yao Yu-Shuang and Richard Gombrich argue that some of the similarities between Fo Guang Shan and Christian social involvements can be explained by conscious imitation while others represent analogous developments that occurred due to similar circumstances (Yao and Gombrich 2018). The development of *renjian* Buddhist social involvements might have been influenced by discourses of Protestantism as a modern model religion, yet they are legitimized with Buddhist language. Fo Guang Shan achieves this less by an elaborate recourse to Buddhist doctrine, but by making Buddhist teachings and culture more accessible. In order to enhance the attractiveness of Chinese Buddhism, the monastic deemphasizes the overtly philosophical and esoteric Chinese Buddhist terminology by expressing Buddhist doctrine in simple everyday language. The focus lies on the applicability of the teachings, yet while doctrinal subtleties are not pressed on the devotees, more advanced study programs, for example at one of the orders' universities, are provided for those who are interested. In addition, Fo Guang Shan has reduced the religious hierarchy between sangha and laity and interaction between the two groups is greatly enhanced. Hsi Lai Temple, for example, holds many cultural activities including book clubs, exhibitions and flower arrangement classes. Through all these activities, which are all led by a monastic, the temple generates a social space where lay Buddhists can meet with monastics, get

involved in temple life, and practice their religion. Fo Guang Shan's founder Hsing Yun is a great popularizer of Buddhism. The bright colors and open spaces that characterize Fo Guang Shan temples, as well as the approachability of the monastics all contribute to this accessibility of Fo Guang Shan style Buddhism. This modern Buddhist religiosity does not only resonate with Taiwanese Americans, but attracts Chinese of different geographic origin to Hsi Lai Temple. In addition to the many Hong Kongese and Sino Vietnamese Americans, PRC Chinese come to the temple in increasing numbers. While many just come as occasional visitors to pray to a *bodhisattva* (a being that compassionately refrains from entering nirvana in order to save others and that is often worshipped as a deity in Mahayana Buddhism), attend a Buddhist ritual or enjoy a vegetarian lunch, more and more are joining the BLIA. When I asked a leading monastic at the Hsi Lai temple how to teach Buddhism to the different groups that come to the temple, he said:

If we are talking about the Humanistic Buddhism as Fo Guang Shan promotes it, its ways and teachings, then Humanistic Buddhism is the same. What is different is that in Taiwan there is Chinese or Taiwanese culture and here it is mixed. It is both, Chinese or Asian and American or Western. We have people from Taiwan, Mainland China, Vietnam, other Asian countries and cultures, but of course also western cultures. There are local Americans and many Mexican Americans and Latinos. They come here very often too. [. . .] There are differences between Mainland Chinese and Taiwanese Buddhism. However, from the perspective of ordinary lay people no matter from Taiwan or China, who are not practitioners, they do not really know the differences between Humanistic Buddhism and types that are more traditional or *conglin* monasteries. They just come here to worship.

(Interview conducted in English; Hsi Lai Temple, US; spring 2018)

The ethnic and national background of the visitors at Hsi Lai Temple are significantly more diverse than in Taiwan, since visitors are coming from a variety of localities in Asia and in addition include non-Asian Americans. When asked for the specific perspectives on Fo Guang Shan by Taiwanese and Mainland Chinese, this monastic states that there is less of a difference in regard to origin, but more so in terms of the degree of familiarity with (Humanistic) Buddhism. In other words, a BLIA member understands the difference between *renjian* and other forms of Buddhism, but for an ordinary worshipper, no matter from Taiwan or the mainland, these are of minor importance. Of course, it is important to note that for practicing Buddhists, who are not familiar with Fo Guang Shan and who are not BLIA members, the term *renjian* Buddhism might have a different meaning (Ji 2013). There are several different interpretations of *renjian* Buddhism in Taiwan today, but the term is also used in the PRC. Reinvented by Zhao Puchu 赵, *renjian* Buddhism was given a Marxist instead of its earlier Nationalist meaning. Thus in the PRC, the term is closely connected to the political agenda of the CCP.

In the diaspora, Fo Guang Shan is transitioning from a mainly Taiwanese organization to a more pluralistic one, with PRC Chinese representing the second big group at many temples. A leading BLIA member from South Africa states that most differences between the Taiwanese and the PRC Chinese at the temple are caused by the fact that both groups have migrated at different times.

The issue with the mainland Chinese is they came here to work or start a business, they work very hard. So time is an issue. They don't have much time to come to the temple and become a volunteer. The Taiwanese before were well established, the economy was good, they already had retirement funds, so they had plenty of time. The new Chinese are all busy working, create a career, and create a living.

(Interview conducted in English; Johannesburg, South Africa; fall 2017)

The majority of Buddhists at Fo Guang Shan temples still comes from Taiwan, especially within the higher ranks of the BLIA. Many have emigrated from Taiwan in the late 1980s and early 1990s and have reached retirement age now. Therefore they have plenty of time to serve as a volunteer. However, the demography at the overseas temples is changing. Fo Guang Shan has reacted to development and

begun to attract more PRC Chinese. Chinese from the PRC are now the second big group at the temple, followed by Chinese from Southeast Asia and non-Chinese locals. When I conducted fieldwork in South Africa, for example, the presidents of the local BLIA chapters were still all Taiwanese; however, the majority of the common members were already mainland Chinese.

6. Conclusions

For a Buddhist organization to be included in Main and Lai's revised definition of Socially Engaged Buddhism, social involvement within the secular sphere of society has to be understood as essentially religious. This definition also applies to Fo Guang Shan *renjian* Buddhism. Although Fo Guang Shan does incorporate the whole range of 'traditional' forms of Buddhist practice, social engagement is given a special function. Volunteering at or for the temple is not just a way of practicing the Buddhist virtue of generosity, but constitutes a space of Buddhist practice that is linked to modernist projects such as nation state building, social welfare, and education. However, this is not done at the expense of other more traditionally religious forms of cultivation, but in addition to them. Rituals like repentance services or dharma assemblies are amongst the most popular religious activities at Fo Guang Shan temples in Taiwan as well as abroad. Social engagement is not the only modernized Buddhist practice at the temple; in fact, the more 'traditional' Buddhist practices underwent reform too. Through a number of operations—the standardization and reformation of Buddhist ritual, the simplification of Buddhist language, the increase of monastic-lay interaction, the application of culture and performance elements to the propagation of the dharma, the establishment of discourses of orthodoxy—a particularly modern yet genuinely Chinese experience of the sacred is facilitated. This modern and 'easily accessible sacred' is to be actualized within the secular sphere. Volunteer work serves as the primary space of practice for this undertaking. Thereby, the Fo Guang Shan overseas temple achieves to preserve the sacred aura of more traditional forms of Chinese Buddhism. At the same time, it is engaged in the secular society of its respective host countries through its many charitable and educational endeavors.

Fo Guang Shan is a centrally organized Buddhist order and its facilities, activities, and rituals are all standardized. While the temple design and religious practices are thus similar everywhere, the people at the temples are not. At an overseas temple, one encounters a much bigger variety of people: Chinese that origin from a variety of places in Asia as well as non-Chinese. This paper has focused on the former group. Different understandings of Buddhism might play a role for the occasional visitor but they lose their importance with increasing proximity to the order. Thus, for the common BLIA member in the diaspora, origin from a specific locality in Asia plays only a minor role on their outlook on Buddhism. In the diaspora, Fo Guang Shan achieves to establish itself as a religious civic actor that transcends particularistic identities based on local origin. As Dean and van der Veer put it, religions "[. . .] produce worlds of experience, in which identities can take shape and partial subjectivities can form, often relatively independent of the processes of capture of identity by the confessional nation state" (Dean and van der Veer 2018, p. 6). By not overtly stressing its Taiwanese origin and through the application of the common parlance of 'we are all Chinese', The Fo Guang Shan overseas temples propose a global Buddhist cosmopolitanism that transcends the older province of origin based particularisms of the Chinese diaspora. Instead, the overseas temple represents a bi-directional cultural orientation that links a global China with the specific host society of a diaspora community.

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