

**STUDIES ON
HUMANISTIC BUDDHISM Ⅳ**

**HUMAN LIFE
人間佛教研究論文選**

Fo Guang Shan Institute of Humanistic Buddhism, Taiwan
and
Nan Tien Institute, Australia

HUMAN WORLD BUDDHISM AT FO GUANG SHAN: LOCALIZING ANTHROPOCENTRIC DHARMA

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Source

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Introduction

In this short essay, I look at “Humanistic Buddhism” as taught and practiced at Fo Guang Shan 佛光山 according to the vision of Venerable Master Hsing Yun 星雲 (born 1927). My first aim is to add some conceptual clarity around the misleading English term “Humanistic Buddhism,” and to propose alternative terms such as “Human World Buddhism” or “Anthropocentric Buddhism.” Secondly, I add some reflections about the tension between what I term “centripetal” (parochial, insider-oriented) and “centrifugal” (global/global, outreach-oriented) modes of engagement in the context of Fo Guang Shan. Finally, I look at the underlying ethos of dharmic “service” to the community in the context of “appropriate” or “skillful means.”

As a Buddhist Studies scholar and long-term practitioner of the Tibetan (Kagyü and Sakya) schools of Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhism, I have no claim to particular expertise in contemporary sinophone Buddhism, but I have had the privilege to observe Fo Guang Shan Buddhism first hand on three continents. I gratefully benefitted from the experience and assignment writing of Ms. Victoria Shipman, a student in my master class at McGill (2014-2015). I am further grateful that I was able to incorporate the experience and research of my spouse, Dr. Patrick de Vries, who made a short documentary about the London Fo Guang Shan temple.¹

“Humanistic Buddhism”: Anthropocentric Buddhism

Humanistic Buddhism has been a conceptual fixture of Sinitic Buddhist modernity in the tradition of Master Taixu (太虛, 1890–1947), who used the term “Human Life Buddhism” (人生佛教, *ren sheng fo jiao*) to describe a distinct recalibration of Buddhist *praxis* (i.e. teachings and practice²) from the concerns of ritual and world-renouncing toward becoming a means of addressing real-world issues in human life (人生). Taixu’s student Yin Shun (印順, 1906–2005) introduced the now more commonly used term “Human World Buddhism” (人間佛教, *ren jian fo jiao*), a Buddhism that is lived and practiced in service of advancing the human (experience and happiness in the)

world (of birth and rebecoming, *samsāra*). This Human World Buddhism adds a compassion-in-action, charitably-engaged service dimension to the Chinese Buddhist traditions of immanent transcendence. *Ren sheng/jian fo jiao* can be conceptually understood in alignment with contemporary “Socially Engaged Buddhism”—a term widely adopted since the 1970s within modernist Buddhist circles and attributed to the Vietnamese Chan monk Thích Nhất Hạnh, the founder of the Order of Interbeing (Tiếp Hiện; French: *Ordre de l’Interêtre*) and Plum Village in France.

In English writings, the term Humanistic Buddhism has established itself as a translation of both 人生佛教 and 人間佛教, but this terminology carries heavy baggage, connoting Chinese Buddhist modernism with European Renaissance Humanism. Of course, the human turn in Renaissance philosophy, away from theology and metaphysics, can be judged as an aptly comparable turn to a focus on life (rather than death) in Buddhist thought and practice of Taixu. Still, the European term humanism, with its long and divergent history, constitutes too loaded and heavily connoted an analogy (rather than a translation) to be sustainable as a translation of 人生佛教 or 人間佛教. I therefore advocate returning to the simpler, more literal translations Human Life or Human World Buddhism. Those among us scholars who delight in the safety provided by complex expressions and terms may want to consider rendering 人生佛教 and 人間佛教 as “Anthropocentric Buddhism.”

Taixu’s Anthropocentric Buddhism (人生佛教) was developed by learning from contemporary Christian charitable practice.³ With his modernist reform plans for Chinese Buddhism, Taixu subsequently became a major influence on Venerable Master Hsing Yun in 1945 while the latter was studying at Jiaoshan Buddhist College in China. In 1949, Venerable Master Hsing Yun founded the Monastic Rescue Team and headed over to Taiwan, establishing his version of Anthropocentric Buddhism (人間佛教) there. In the 1950s, Venerable Master Hsing Yun was active at the Leiyan Temple in Yilan. In 1966, the building work started in Kaohsiung for the Fo Guang Shan headquarters, which opened 1967. The latest, most impressive addition to Fo

Guang Shan's global headquarters opened in 2011: the Buddha Museum.⁴ Today, Fo Guang Shan can pride itself on "more temples and clerics around the world than any other Buddhist organization,"⁵ and on "carrying out the goals of propagating Humanistic Buddhism and establishing a Pure Land on Earth."⁶

Sinocentrism and Globalization

Venerable Master Hsing Yun's Dharma propagation is based on both Sinocentric and globalizing impulses. The overarching objective is to be active in and engaged with society in order to build a pure land on earth, hence rejecting "a life secluded from society."⁷

The four methods of Dharma propagation are: (1) providing a cultural link to China, (2) creating links of affinity (結緣, *jie yuan*), (3) sparking people's curiosity, and (4) localizing Buddhist teachings and practice.⁸

The first and third method, the cultural link to China and exciting curiosity, are neatly exemplified by the publication *365 Days for Travelers*,⁹ a substantial, bilingual, day-by-day inspirational volume containing excerpts from Chinese literary and Buddhist classics aimed at daily contemplation.

Hence, Venerable Master Hsing Yun's Dharma propagation roots itself firmly in the sinophone cultural sphere while seeking to broaden the transcultural appeal of his Sinitic modernist Buddhism.

Venerable Master Hsing Yun's second and fourth methods of creating links of affinity and localizing Buddhist *praxis* also link up. Creating links of affinity¹⁰ with influential community figures such as politicians, business people, educators, and other community stakeholders is viewed as "a trickle-down method to promote the Dharma in countries without a Buddhist heritage,"¹¹ a form of "expedient means (*fangbian*) for making people in that society more favorably disposed to Buddhist teachings."¹² As Fo Guang Shan volunteer Victoria Shipman puts it, "Fo Guang Shan sees no need to proselytize

aggressively as they rely instead on people's Buddha Nature that predisposes them to be interested in the Dharma."¹³ As Scott Pacey observes, this method proposes an organic trajectory from "sympathizers" to "adherents,"¹⁴ "to create an earthly Pure Land, one individual at a time."¹⁵

Centripetal and Centrifugal Localization

While Fo Guang Shan's four methods have resulted in impressive growth and achievements, there is, necessarily, an ongoing tension in the negotiation between what Alexander Soucy calls the Global Buddhist and Parochial Buddhist tendencies, which triangulate with the local(ized) Buddhist *praxis*.¹⁶ For Fo Guang Shan the creative and sometimes obstructive tension is formed by the Sinocentric, ethnic in-group-oriented ("parochial," in Soucy's terms) drives, and the globalizing–glocalizing and localizing efforts. The imbalance between (re-)creating cultural cohesion (which I call "centripetal") and transcultural expansion ("centrifugal") is visible through the overwhelmingly Chinese-descendent membership of both Fo Guang Shan's lay volunteer organization (Buddha's Light International Association [BLIA]) and temple visitors, even in countries such as Japan or the UK. The predominance of monolingual sinophone centripetal insider activities (such as temple services, classes, sino-cultural activities) and the relative lack of bilingual or local-language Dharma activities is certainly a great challenge for attracting non-sinophone locals. This observation supports Chandler's argument that Fo Guang Shan is largely unsuccessful in attracting non-sinocultural members, despite a rhetoric of localization (本土化, *ben tu hua*).¹⁷

In contrast, Fo Guang Shan's centrifugal outreach activities are based on inter- and transculturality, such as interfaith activities, school and university outreach, exhibitions, and joint ventures with local charities. All of these social initiatives are designed to draw outsiders in, make connections and achieve inculturation. In fact, the non-intrusive, "soft" methods of Dharma propagation conform neatly with Fo Guang Shan's main objectives: "to propagate Buddhist teachings through cultural activities; to nurture talents through education; to benefit societies through charitable programs; to purify human hearts and minds through Buddhist practice."¹⁸ As the documentary

filmmaker Patrick de Vries elaborates from his experience with London Fo Guang Shan:

Fo Guang Shan and BLIA organized the celebration of the birthday of the Buddha at Leicester Square and held an open house at Margaret Street with chanting, the ritual washing of the Buddha, performances, tea ceremony, and a hands-on calligraphy exhibition. On other occasions Fo Guang Shan sponsored Buddhist dances, and one of the venerables represents Fo Guang Shan at a forum on Buddhism in the West. They also organize sports days and special lectures.

Education is part of every Fo Guang Shan center around the world, with schools, colleges, and a university. Fo Guang Shan London helps people reconnect with Buddhism, especially among the Asian immigrants in the London area, giving them a sense of home, of belonging, a sense of purpose. The education doesn't stop there. Venerable Master Hsing Yun wrote countless books on the Buddha Dharma. In 2001, Master Hsing Yun started a project to compile an *Encyclopedia of Buddhist Art*. In 2013, this project was completed and translated into English, consisting of twenty volumes with categories such as architecture, caves, sculptures, paintings, calligraphy, artifacts, and people. The project was made possible with the help of numerous scholars and volunteers, three hundred monastics, one hundred forty scholars from sixteen different countries, and more than four hundred volunteers.

Fo Guang Shan and BLIA are very active as a charity and collect large sums of money for all sorts of

humanitarian crises. A recent example for this was a charity event to raise funds for Lepra, a charity working to beat leprosy. I attended this event on Mother's Day. People were invited to a tea party in aid of Lepra. A representative gave an informative talk and explained the importance of this charity, with snacks and entertainment provided by the BLIA volunteers. In Taiwan they also provide the needy with free medical care, warm clothing in winter, and food.¹⁹

The sinocultural centripetal/centrifugal tension in objectives and methods is reflected in Fo Guang Shan's double mandate of "establishing temples in other countries and sending monastics around the world: first, to act as a cultural bridge to the Chinese and Taiwanese diaspora, and then secondly to attract non-Chinese Westerners through a process of localizing."²⁰ The tension in Fo Guang Shan's dual mandate between parochialism—the preservation of Chinese culture—and globalism, and the objective to achieve true localization beyond the mere rhetoric of *bentuhua* (本土化), appear to form the most urgent challenges faced by Fo Guang Shan worldwide.

Appropriate Means: Concluding Reflections

Whatever challenges occur during the triangulation of the global, parochial, and local²¹ at Fo Guang Shan, the sincerity, successes, and aspirations of this large modernist Buddhist movement are evident from the vast range of cultural and charitable in-group and outreach activities and projects. Based on the glimpses of the "Human World Buddhist," Fo Guang Shan approach that I have gleaned from unstructured participant-observation and interactions with Fo Guang Shan temples in the UK, Taiwan, Japan, and the US. It has become clear that the constant, careful negotiations in the propagation of the Dharma are driven by a deep rooted ethos of service, in accordance with Venerable Master Hsing Yun's emphasis that Buddhist practice is foremost service to others²²—*service* as "action Dharma."²³

Examples of such services include the abundant in-group educational opportunities, such as the impressive array of activities at Hsi Lai Temple in Los Angeles, including the Buddha’s Light School, the Hsi Lai Temple Scout groups and Buddha’s Light Youth orchestra. There are also cohesion-building Chinese festival celebrations and volunteer socials. Some of the most impressive among the celebrations I attended include the Lunar New Year festivities with the annual, post-New Year volunteer banquet and tombola; I was able to observe these occasions in Taiwan (Taipei vihara) in 2018 and in California (Hsi Lai) in 2019. The Thank-You Dinner includes the lay volunteers being served desserts by the monastics—a powerful gesture both of service and gratitude.

On the centrifugal outreach side, as seen above at the example of the London branch,²⁴ there is a flurry of BLIA/monastic museal-cultural, library, school, university, civic (e.g. at the UK parliament and democracy week) and Interfaith activities. And, of course, Fo Guang Shan sponsors the extraordinary and immersive educational experiences for students locally (such as the student retreats in both English and Chinese at Hsi Lai temple, Los Angeles), regionally (such as the European retreats at the Paris temple), and internationally with the acclaimed Woodenfish program (2002-2012²⁵) and its successor programs: the Fo Guang Shan Buddhist Monastic Retreat (guided by Ven. Hui Feng, 2014–) and the International Youth Seminar on Life and Ch’an (2010–).

Central to this ethos of service is Fo Guang Shan’s take on the core Mahāyāna Buddhist concept of *upāya-kauśalya* (Tib. *thabs mkhas*)—方便 (*fangbian*, Japanese: *hōben*). Usually rendered “skillful means” within Sinicized Buddhism, *fangbian* might be more fittingly translated as “appropriate means”²⁶: teaching and spreading the Dharma in accordance to the level of understanding and capacity of the audience as the ultimate form of compassion. This notion of the “appropriateness” of Dharma activities explains the Fo Guang Shan dual emphases-in-tension on sinocultural heritage on the one hand—to create and preserve cohesion and belonging—and, on the other hand, *bentuhua*—localization, in order to offer pathways into the

Dharma. Part of the strive for appropriateness in service is the integration of the modern Mandarin meaning of *fangbian* as “convenience,” as evident by the well-publicized Fo Guang Shan mottoes: “Give others faith. Give others joy. Give others hope. Give others convenience.”²⁷ This marriage of Buddhist and vernacular meaning of *fangbian* is an example of skillfulness in itself: through giving convenience, a welcoming environment is created so that visitors and participants can feel relaxed and at home, and hence become more susceptible to Dharma teaching and experience. Appropriate convenience means that visitors, sympathizers, and adherents can appropriately and gradually progress in their understanding and application of the Dharma. Of course, this soft, welcoming approach to the Buddhadharma can draw criticism. One of my undergraduate students who went to the Woodenfish program at Kaohsiung in 2012 initially took great exception to the presence of the Starbucks at the Buddha Museum: the commercial-looking museum complex clearly did not agree with this student’s (orientalized and romantic) expectation of retreat austerities. On the other hand, this student subsequently reported how the welcoming, “commercial” environs were certainly distant impressions during the ‘tough’ silent retreat week at the end of the program. These participant impressions neatly underline Fo Guang Shan’s gradual “appropriate means” Dharma approach.

It becomes clear from the previous observations that, while Fo Guang Shan is successfully engaging in centrifugal outreach and “soft” Dharma propagation, the key challenge appears to be building a bridge from charitable and cultural outreach and the Dharma curiosity it engenders towards community belonging beyond the constraints of sinocentrism. In other words, how to attract those curious (and often impressed) locals beyond the occasional sinophiles, orientalist-romantics, or partners of sinophone members? How to cater for the specific, non-sinocultural needs of interested locals? Possible answers, some of which have already been trialed at various Fo Guang Shan locations, include regular and more frequent local-language Dharma classes and services (including chanting in the local language such as English or Japanese), improving the English (or local language) skills of sinophone members while offering some Mandarin tuition to non-Chinese

speakers, pairing up of volunteers from different cultural backgrounds as well as maintaining the dual/parallel approach to achieve both cohesive group-belonging and inculturation. While the language barriers tend to ease with the second and third generations of sinocultural members, the cultural and linguistic challenges inherent to Sino-Buddhist practice remains and can only be overcome when services, meditation, Dharma-sharing, and teachings are sensibly de-sinicized. The balance between maintaining (Chinese Buddhist) heritage and authenticity, and, opening-up, globalizing, and (g)localizing, can only be achieved through constant and conscientious negotiations of needs in the triangulation of the global, the parochial, and the local.

Notes

- 1 See “Documenting an Urban Temple: Fo Guang Shan London,” Patrick de Vries, Buddhist Door Global, April 30, 2019, <https://www.buddhistdoor.net/features/documenting-an-urban-temple-fo-guang-shan-london>. The full documentary is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jIicjVZ2eqw>.
- 2 See Richard K. Payne, “Introduction,” in *Approaching the Land of Bliss: Religious Praxis in the Cult of Amitābha*, eds. Richard K. Payne and Kenneth K. Tanaka, Kuroda Institute Studies in East Asian Buddhism, vol. 14 (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004), 3-5.
- 3 Yu-Shuang Yao and Richard Gombrich, “Christianity as Model and Analogue in the Formation of the ‘Humanistic Buddhism of Tàì Xū and Hsīng Yún,” *Buddhist Studies Review* 34, no.2 (2017): 207-209.
- 4 cf. Miao Guang Shih, “Modern Religious Tourism in Taiwan: A Case Study of Fo Guang Shan Buddha Memorial Centre,” 人間佛教學報.藝文 [*Humanistic Buddhism Journal—Arts and Culture*] 3 (2016): 218-237.
- 5 Stuart Chandler, “Spreading Buddha’s Light: The Internationalization of Foguang Shan,” in *Buddhist Missionaries in the Era of Globalization*, ed. Linda Learman (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2005), 167.
- 6 “Introduction to Fo Guang Shan,” Fo Guang Shan Monastery, accessed October 15, 2019, <https://www.fgs.org.tw/en/Organizations/Introduction/>.
- 7 David Schak and Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao, “Taiwan’s Socially Engaged Buddhist Groups,” *China Perspectives* 59 (May–June 2005): 5, <http://chinaperspectives.revues.org/2803>.
- 8 Stuart Chandler, “Spreading Buddha’s Light: The Internationalization of Foguang Shan,” in *Buddhist Missionaries in the Era of Globalization*, ed. Linda Learman (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2005), 162.
- 9 Hsing Yun, ed., *365 Days for Travelers: Wisdom from Chinese Literary and Buddhist Classics. A Humanistic Buddhism Reader* (Kaohsiung: Venerable Master Hsing Yun Public Education Trust Fund, 2015).
- 10 See Stuart Chandler, *Establishing a Pure Land on Earth* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004); cf. also Jonathan Mair, “Fo Guang Shan Buddhism and Ethical Conversations across Borders: ‘Sowing Seeds of Affinity’,” in *Cosmopolitanism and Transnationalism: Vision, Ethics, Practices, Studies across Disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol. 15

- (Helsinki: Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, 2014), 66-89.
- 11 Stuart Chandler, "Spreading Buddha's Light: The Internationalization of Foguang Shan," in *Buddhist Missionaries in the Era of Globalization*, ed. Linda Learman (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 174.
 - 12 Ibid, 175.
 - 13 Victoria Shipman, "Fo Guang Shan, Woodenfish and FGBMR: The Challenge of 'Localizing' in a Global World" (RELG555 2014-2015, McGill University, December 11, 2014): 9.
 - 14 In Tweed's terms, Thomas A. Tweed, "Who Is a Buddhist? Night-Stand Buddhists and Other Creatures," in *Westward Dharma: Buddhism beyond Asia*, eds. Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 17-33.
 - 15 Scott Pacey, "Heterotopia and the Southern Heaven: Xingyun's Antipodean Buddhist Mission," *Flows of Faith: Religious Reach and Community in Asia and the Pacific*, eds. Lenore Manderson, Wendy Smith and Matt Tomlinson (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012), 132.
 - 16 "Buddhist Localism." See Alexander Soucy, "Buddhist Globalism and the Search for Canadian Buddhism," in *Flowers on the Rock: Global and Local Buddhists in Canada*, eds. John S. Harding, Victor Sogen Hori and Alexander Soucy (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), 37-40.
 - 17 Chandler, "Spreading Buddha's Light: The Internationalization of Foguang Shan"; Lina Verchery, "The Woodenfish Program: Fo Guang Shan, Canadian Youth, and a New Generation of Buddhist Missionaries," in *Wild Geese: Buddhism in Canada*, eds. John S. Harding, Victor Sogen Hori and Alexander Soucy (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), 213.
 - 18 "Objectives," Fo Guang Shan Monastery, accessed October 15, 2019, <https://www.fgs.org.tw/en/Organizations/Objectives/>
 - 19 "Documenting an Urban Temple: Fo Guang Shan London."
 - 20 Shipman, "Fo Guang Shan, Woodenfish and FGBMR: The Challenge of 'Localizing' in a Global World"; cf. Chandler, "Spreading Buddha's Light: The Internationalization of Foguang Shan," 178; Verchery, "The Woodenfish Program: Fo Guang Shan, Canadian Youth, and a New Generation of Buddhist Missionaries," 213-214.
 - 21 Alexander Soucy, "Buddhist Globalism and the Search for Canadian Buddhism," 39.
 - 22 See Venerable Master Hsing Yun, *Humanistic Buddhism: Holding True to the Original Intent of Buddha*, trans. Ven. Miao Guang, 3rd English Ed. (Kaohsiung: Venerable Master Hsing Yun Public Education Trust Fund 2016), 72-83.
 - 23 Christopher Queen, "Introduction: From Altruism to Activism" in *Action Dharma: New Studies in Engaged Buddhism*, eds. Christopher Queen, Charles S. Prebish, and Damien Keown (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 1.
 - 24 "Documenting an Urban Temple: Fo Guang Shan London."
 - 25 cf. Verchery, "The Woodenfish Program: Fo Guang Shan, Canadian Youth, and a New Generation of Buddhist Missionaries."
 - 26 Gene Reeves, "Appropriate Means as the Ethics of the Lotus Sutra," in *A Buddhist Kaleidoscope: Essays on the Lotus Sutra*, ed. Gene Reeves (Tokyo: Kosei Pub. Co., 2002), 379-392.
 - 27 "Objectives," Fo Guang Shan Monastery, accessed October 15, 2019, <https://www.fgs.org.tw/en/Organizations/Objectives/>

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