

Religious Philanthropy and Chinese Civil Society

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With the extraordinary growth of China's economy over the past decades, a new generation of successful business entrepreneurs and billionaires has appeared, most of whom are incarnations of dreams of "rags to riches." At the same time, the gap between the rich and poor has widened, and, far (and sometimes not so far) from the booming cities of the coasts, China's impoverished rural hinterlands often suffer from declining public investment in health and education. Many of the new barons of business have established charitable foundations to help alleviate poverty—a growing trend that is promoted by the Chinese state. In a bid to publicize generosity and encourage charity, many magazines and government bodies regularly publish honor rolls and lists of China's "top philanthropists." Most of them are wealthy real estate developers and pop stars—but one name that sometimes appears is that of an illiterate, eighty-year-old former beggar, Lin Dong, a charismatic Buddhist healer who has donated tens of millions of dollars to build schools in poor villages all over China.

Born in 1930, Lin Dong became an orphan as a child and began a life of errant mendicancy. He married another beggar and, after the People's Republic was established in 1949, was assigned a job as a manual laborer, helping to ship loads of goods along the waterways of Guangdong province. In the 1970s he lost his right hand in an accident, and a few years later he suffered from a stroke. In a state of near death, he had a vision of the Chinese god Jigong, who assured him that he would recover and entrusted him with the mission of rescuing those who suffer in the world.

Jigong (1130–1207) was a monk who had been kicked out of his monastery for eccentric behavior and his love of meat and alcohol; he then roamed the streets and acquired a reputation as a crazy trickster with a benevolent heart, who had magical powers and could always be counted on to help ordinary people. Over the centuries he was worshipped as a popular god and as a character in Chinese literature and folk legends; by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a wave of

spirit-writing societies—in which a medium enters a trance and traces characters in a box of sand—produced texts and morality books that claimed Jigong as the author, and that exhorted their followers to live moral lives, to do good deeds, and to engage in philanthropy to save the world.

After his vision of Jigong and his seemingly miraculous recovery from his stroke, Lin Dong established an altar to him and worshipped him in his home, and discovered that he had uncanny healing powers. The sick flocked to him from all quarters. He prescribed Chinese herbs for them and exhorted them to do good deeds, to accumulate good karma and attain cosmic recompense. Many were cured and became his followers. Full of gratitude to him for saving their lives, they are willing to do anything for him. Lin Dong encourages them to donate money, and they gladly respond; living a simple life and wearing cheap clothes, he offers all the funds collected to build schools and homes for the aged. As a result, although he has no wealth of his own, Lin Dong has raised and donated sums comparable to those given by China's richest business tycoons. And he encourages his followers who have little money to offer their time as volunteers, visiting the poor and the elderly.

Lin Dong's experience and philanthropic actions are deeply rooted in China's religious culture of cosmic recompense, as mentioned in chapter 1. "To become a Buddhist," he says, "is like opening a bank account: we should try our best to make credits through good deeds, instead of continuous debits; if we continuously draw from the account we will have a deficit, and if we do not make repayment to the overdrawn account, nobody will help us to settle it. The more industriously we foster charitable deeds, the more our recompense will increase."¹

Most people assume that philanthropy, or the voluntary association among people for the public good, is a Western concept, even a Christian tradition. However, there exists a rich tradition of philanthropy in Chinese culture and religion as well. This chapter moves beyond an exploration of philanthropy as it is understood in the West, and introduces readers to the different ways in which Chinese people through their history have understood philanthropy and have tried to achieve an idea of "the good" by giving and serving others.

Philanthropy, Charity, and Social Services in the Chinese Context

Is there a specifically Chinese way of doing philanthropy, and is it different from what we understand in the West as charity and volunteerism? To answer this question, it will help to recall that etymologically speaking, the English word *philanthropy* is the "love (*philos*) of humans (*anthropos*)," and the *philanthropist*, the "one who loves fellow human beings." In relation to this, *charity* is from the Latin word *caritas*, which is about love, but also, is the origin of the verb "to care."

Volunteerism suggests that individuals, of their own volition, decide to give or help other people, because they feel it is their moral duty to do so. It cannot be coerced, that is, it cannot be mandated by a government, no matter how benevolent

the intention may be. This does not mean that people who are members of a religious association, which says in its *credo* that helping others is part of their religious duty, cannot be considered volunteers, or that they are coerced by their religion to help other people. Individuals have the choice, ultimately, in the way they interpret the scripture of their religious beliefs. The concept of compassion in Buddhism, for example, can be interpreted differently by adherents of that religion, to mean simply not to harm others, or to sacrifice one's own interest to help others first. In the People's Republic of China, many NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) that claim to be based on volunteerism are actually sponsored by the state, and participation in their activities can be compulsory. To work in such a government-organized NGO (GONGO) in such conditions cannot be seen as volunteerism. Recent events such as the grassroots mobilization of volunteers in the aftermath of the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan, however, suggest that genuine volunteerism is gaining ground.

It may help to use Chinese terminology to understand the Chinese approach to philanthropy. The word *cishan*, which is the usual translation for "philanthropy," "charity," and "benevolence," is formed of two characters with a larger meaning than their Western equivalent. The first character, *ci*, stands for "kind, benevolent, benign, charitable, loving, fond, merciful," and is also used for words associated with "maternal." Buddhist associations involved in philanthropy such as Tzu Chi (*Ciji*) from Taiwan (see chapter 6) or *Cihui* from Hong Kong, use this same character. The second character, *shan*, stands for "good, virtuous, goodness, good deed, benevolent action," and it is also a verb, as in "to remedy," and "to relieve." The name of Miaoshan, the goddess described in chapter 6, which means "sublime goodness" is another Chinese rendition for Guanyin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. This suggests that in the Chinese context, the word for *philanthropy* also points to an action that is imbued with a profound ethical and religious significance. However, if one wants to find evidence for religious philanthropy in the long history of China, we find little mention of *cishan*, which suggests that the concept is modern, like *zongjiao*, the concept for religion itself. This does not mean that there was nothing comparable to this form of philanthropy, however, because there is ample evidence in Chinese traditions of a long history of benevolence and compassion, and dedication to the common good, from a purely religious perspective. Since the Ming dynasty, *shantang* (benevolent halls) and *shanhui* (benevolent associations) have been founded in almost all parts of China. Many of them are of religious nature. In recent years there has been a revival of *shantangs* in southern China.

Traditional Chinese Religious Philanthropy

Chinese religious associations had been conducting philanthropic or other social services before the modern notion of philanthropy emerged in China. This is not only because traditional Chinese religions already have a universalistic notion of

compassion and benevolence that is compatible with philanthropic ideals, but also because religions in China had pervasive influence on Chinese lives at all levels—state officials, intellectuals, social elites, and peasants alike. Moreover, they were often the center of public life at the state level as well as the grassroots level. As a result, they could mobilize enormous amounts of the social and economic capital that is essential for philanthropy. In the nineteenth century, Christian missionary organizations introduced modern forms of philanthropy that became the model for social services, which were later taken over by the state or emulated by other religious communities.

One could start with Confucianism to find an expression of philanthropy that is embedded within an ethical and religious perspective. The concept of *ren* (benevolence) is central to the Confucian view of social and political life. Used extensively in Confucian thinking, *ren* has acquired many meanings, ranging from “benevolence” to “humanity,” but it is generally accepted to mean an attitude of love and respect for others. In this view, benevolent conduct must extend according to the limits of one’s ability. This starts with the cultivation of the benevolent mind in an individual, and then proceeds outward. It begins with filial piety and fraternal obligation, and extends to an ethics of responsibility. A good example is Guangren Tang (the Hall for Spreading Benevolence), which was established by the social elites in Tianjin in 1878 to offer shelter for orphans and chaste widows.² These moral prescriptions have exercised a profound influence on social practices. For example, Joanna Handlin-Smith found that during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), the neo-Confucian orientations of the ruling classes and the newly emerging merchant classes, had imposed on them expectations about good behavior that encouraged philanthropy. As a result of these changes, new categories of temples were devoted to cater to the welfare of the common people. In her study of famine relief during the last decade of the Ming dynasty, she found that philanthropy was undertaken on a large scale and benefactors went to great length to show their good deeds. In other words, charity was seen as a socially positive trend to be encouraged.³

Daoism, which benefited from state patronage during the Three Kingdom period (220–280) and the Sui dynasty (581–618), approached philanthropy from a different angle. Daoist masters contributed to the development of Chinese medicine and medical ethics. Daoist priests were expected to provide protection against diseases and demons through rituals, exorcism, and healing. The most common form of Daoist charity was to provide free medicine and medical care to the needy.

The third tradition that influences the practice of philanthropy in China is Buddhism. Compassion is a major element of its teachings. The alleviation of human suffering that is central to its doctrine has appealed to a great number of people through Chinese history. It attracted many people affected by the social and economic dislocation of a divided China between the fifth and ninth centuries, and after a long eclipse following persecutions from the state that culminated in 845, it experienced a revival thanks to state patronage during the late Qing dynasty

(1644–1911). Lay Buddhists could benefit from that climate and created associations to support the development of their religion and set up philanthropic associations. By the twentieth century, this had inspired a major movement, known as “humanistic Buddhism,” which puts philanthropy at the center of the practice, and which remains influential all over the Chinese world today.⁴

The most common form of religious practice and religious-based philanthropy, arguably, is through popular religion, which incorporates references to all three traditions. For instance, one of the prominent popular religious deities, the Great Lord for Protecting Life (Baosheng Dadi) commonly found in southern Fujian and Taiwan, was canonized during the Ming dynasty as a Daoist immortal. In his lifetime, his name was Wu Tao, and he was an adept Chinese doctor of the Song dynasty. Like many practitioners of Chinese medicine of his time, he was also good at Daoist rituals and magical arts. After he died collecting herbs in the hills, people established a temple to commemorate him, and with migration such temples were constructed in all parts of southern Fujian and Taiwan. Not only can worshippers pray for good health in the temples, but they can also access basic medical help for free. Today these temples still serve as free medical clinics for the local poor, although their services include Western medicine as well.

“Spirit-writing” associations, which were widespread in China prior to 1949 and continue to operate in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia, practice a mixture of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism in their rituals, which consist of mediums writing divine texts while they are in trance. Such activities, which offer devotees blessings and advice on health and other matters of concern, are often performed in a *shantang*, or “hall of charity.” The syncretic *Dejiao* associations among Chinese in Malaysia and Singapore (often known in English as the “Moral Uplifting Societies”) incorporate the “five teachings”—Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity, and Islam—into one. Jigong, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, is one of the main gods worshipped by these groups. Besides spirit-writing, *Dejiao* associations provide free Chinese medicine and spaces for ancestor tablets and have become the largest charities among the Chinese communities in Thailand and parts of Malaysia.⁵ That is another example of the flexible and creative channels through which popular Chinese religion provides philanthropy. Groups similar to *Dejiao*, which some scholars call “redemptive societies,” were once common all over China,⁶ but they were often repressed by state officials as “heterodox teachings” during the Qing dynasty or as “reactionary sects and secret societies” in the early years of the People’s Republic. Many of them were simply mutual help societies and, as such, acted as philanthropic associations. Most of these associations would appeal to the same concepts as those of more traditional Chinese religious associations, such as benevolence or compassion.

Popular religion in China is traditionally territorialized, which means that it is usually based on “community temples” that provide services to the local residents. However, with the intensification of globalization, even popular religion is increasingly deterritorialized. For example, the Ghost Festival among the Chinese in

Malaysia in 2008 caught media attention because the local religious leaders assembled two large paper condo high-rises to be burned for the victims of the Sichuan earthquake that had happened earlier that year. Spirit mediums in Jiangsu province competed with Buddhist temples in hosting services to appease the ghosts of the Sichuan earthquake. The clients of those spirit mediums volunteered to mobilize the local community to donate money, paper money, incense, vegetarian meals, and so on. While spirit mediums performed the ritual for the victims for free, popular sutra chanting groups gathered and chanted for free.

Protestant and Catholic missionaries started providing social services in China in the late nineteenth century. Supported by the wealth of the Western powers—and sometimes by their armies—they were able to offer succor to victims of natural disaster and economic deprivation, and by the middle of the nineteenth century, they had established hospitals in Guangzhou, Ningbo, and Shanghai. In part as a consequence of this philanthropic activity, they were able to convert increasing numbers of people.

The unprecedented success of Christian missions in China in the nineteenth century paralleled the trend in Europe in which the modern notion of philanthropy came to the top of the agenda for Christian organizations. As shown in chapter 3 of this book, Christian missionaries were enormously successful among ethnic minorities such as the Miao, Yi, Jingpo, and Lisu. One of the earliest things the missionaries did was to establish schools, teach literacy skills, and build hospitals. Many of the schools and hospitals the early missionaries built are still in use today. Although Christian philanthropy is based on the idea of universal love, a concept that might seem foreign to Chinese minds, it resonates well conceptually with the notion of compassion found in all major Chinese religious traditions.

Contemporary Forms of Religious Philanthropy

In contrast to the popular notion and state rhetoric that claims that Christian philanthropy in China always means Western infiltration, many Christian organizations mainly rely on domestic resources to provide social services and philanthropy. The YMCA in Hangzhou is a good example. YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association) is a Christian organization that originated in England in response to deteriorating social conditions in the mid-nineteenth century. It soon developed into an international movement. The Chinese YMCA received help from its North American chapter at its establishment in 1914, but now it receives minimal aid from other international YMCAs or Christian organizations. It generates most of its income from property rentals, fees for classes, hotels, and other private donations. Financially the YMCA is independent of any churches as well. Instead it relies on local volunteers, who are mostly nonreligious university students, to carry out its main social service programs. The only international "aid" they receive are native-English speakers who volunteer to teach English in its various career training

programs. They are able to establish community service centers in which they provide free medical and entertainment services to the elderly, education programs to laid-off workers, and a clinic for children with autism, an increasingly common disease among children in China. None of the services are directly modeled after Western Christian practices. Rather, their major inspiration and ideas of philanthropy come from the social services section in the China Christian Council and the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. Churches and Christian organizations all over China are represented in the council. The social services section is especially important in providing a platform on which different organizations exchange ideas to improve their operation. The two official national Christian organizations have been active in assisting the development of Christian philanthropy. Their aims are partly political in nature, but the result is a more robust Christian social services program in China. Under the current banner of harmonious society they can achieve more with the resources to which they have access.

BOX 8.1 The Amity Foundation

Philip L. Wickeri

The Amity Foundation is an excellent example of a Christian-initiated organization that has contributed to social development and poverty alleviation in order to encourage a “new kind of Christian involvement” in Chinese society. Founded in Nanjing in 1985, it was among the first NGOs of its kind in mainland China. Amity’s purpose was threefold: to contribute to social development and openness to the outside world; to make Christian participation in society more widely known; and to serve as a channel for people-to-people exchange and the ecumenical sharing of resources.

Amity’s approach has been to emphasize cooperation, not confrontation, with the state. Early projects included the recruitment of church-sponsored language teachers from overseas to teach in colleges and universities, support for blindness prevention and special education, and the encouragement of new initiatives in medical training. Gradually, Amity’s work expanded to include integrated rural development; grassroots medical work; education in HIV/AIDS; relief and rehabilitation in response to natural disasters; and child-centered social welfare. The foundation did pioneering work in many of these fields. Amity has also sought to develop church-run social service projects that serve as a bridge between Christians and the broader society. Like church-related development organizations in other parts of the world, Amity does not proselytize.

Initially, a large percentage of Amity’s funding and support came from overseas partner organizations, most of them Christian, as well as from church groups in Hong Kong. In recent years, support has increasingly come from Chinese businesspeople and young professionals, many of whom also serve as Amity volunteers. The Amity Foundation is close to the China Christian Council and the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, and Bishop K. H. Ting was the leading spirit behind the Amity Foundation in the 1980s and 1990s. Amity has come a long way since its beginning.

continued

BOX 8.1 (continued)

By 2010, it had a budget of more than 100 million *yuan* and a staff of over fifty, making it one of the thirteen largest charities in mainland China. Amity has tried to develop a professionalized staff as a means to put faith into practice. It emphasizes sustainable development in all its projects, draws on a participatory model for project management, and emphasizes cooperation with local governments and beneficiaries.

The Amity Printing Company was established as a subsidiary of the Amity Foundation in 1986. A joint venture with the United Bible Societies, the printing company was designed to “give priority to the printing of the Bible” as well as print other materials in service to society. Over the last two decades, the Amity Printing Company has printed more than eighty million Bibles and New Testaments. The overwhelming majority of these are for distribution to Protestant churches in China (including Bibles in eight minority languages), but in the last few years, Bibles have also been produced for export. By 2010, the Amity Printing Company had become the largest printer of Bibles in the world.

In China there has emerged a new model of Buddhist charity in recent years. Often a charity center affiliated with the temple is set up. The Hanshan Temple in Suzhou, Jiangsu province, for instance, established a charity center, which operates several nonprofit *cishan chaoshi*, or charity supermarkets. It provides the urban poor (such as laid-off workers and the physically and mentally handicapped) with a minimum monthly allowance that can be used to purchase basic merchandise, such as oil, rice, detergent, shampoo, and so on, for well below the market price. Even though the abbot of the temple is the head of this charity center and temple volunteers also volunteer in the center, the finances of the charity center and the temple are separate. A visitor to the temple will see two donation boxes at the main halls of the temple—one for the temple itself and other for the charity center. The city government plays an important role in the project. The charity center obtains a list of “those who live under the poverty line” from the city government and distributes vouchers to families whose names appear on that list.

The tourist destination and Buddhist site of Lingshan in Wuxi, also in Jiangsu province, also set up a charitable foundation as its own vehicle for philanthropy. This foundation has been successful in areas of education (it established schools and scholarships for students who cannot afford tuition), poverty relief, disaster relief, environmental protection, and moral education. Many a poor patient has obtained generous help from the foundation to cover medical bills. After the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, the foundation was among the first groups of NGOs to arrive at the front line with all sorts of goods such as clothes, medicine, tents, and food and personnel such as doctors and other volunteers. The honorary head of the foundation is Master Wuxiang, the abbot of the Xiangfu Temple that is located inside the Lingshan estate. The secretary general is the CEO of the Lingshan Company, a business that includes tourism, real estate, vegetarian food industry, and an incense and candle company. It was said that the CEO converted to Buddhism after he took up the Lingshan project. If Master

Wuxiang is the spiritual teacher of universalistic ideas of compassion and benevolence, the CEO of the Lingshan Company is the executor of those ideas. The sources of income, however, mainly come from public donations. The company shoulders the operating cost of the full-time employees, whereas specific projects are often conducted by volunteers who gather through personal connections and online recruitment. The “Lingshan model” is highly successful in molding religion, business, and NGOs together to most efficiently provide social services.

BOX 8.2 The Rise of Transnational Chinese Charity: The *Tzu Chi* and *Cihui* Foundations

Tzu Chi, the Compassionate Merit Society (*Ciji Gongdehui*) like, to a lesser degree, Foguangshan’s lay affiliate, the Buddha Light International Association (*Guoji foguanghui*), has been active in providing disaster relief outside Taiwan since 1991. The relief operations of Tzu Chi have been launched in countries with which Taiwan has no diplomatic relations, at the same time as similar operations were initiated in the PRC. Tzu Chi performs eight different categories of activities in Taiwan: charity, medical help, education, cultural services, bone marrow donation, international relief, environmental protection, and community work. Since 1992, its volunteers have been sent from Taiwan, but also from overseas Taiwanese communities, to offer relief to victims of natural disaster, pandemics, or warfare, in all continents, and also in most provinces and autonomous regions of China. These activities have continued over the years despite important changes in Chinese and Taiwanese domestic politics, and despite dramatic tensions in cross-strait relations.

Its missions each last about a week or two, and its volunteers provide disaster relief by personally delivering clothes, food, and sometimes cash to victims of flood, drought, or earthquake. Some of the operations have deployed considerable logistics in cooperation with other NGOs, such as *Médecins sans frontières*, or the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). In China alone, Tzu Chi has contributed to building homes in Anhui, Jiangsu, and Guangxi. In Hebei, even new villages have been built. It has also supported local health care by supporting financially the construction of ten nursing homes in Anhui, children’s hospitals in nine provinces, and a rehabilitation center in Wuhan. It has also supported education by helping to rebuild schools in all regions of the country, and by offering scholarships.

Lay Buddhist organizations from Hong Kong are also involved in the PRC. Since 2000, a Buddhist charity led by a layperson, the Gracious Glory Buddhist Foundation (*Cihui fojiao jijinhui*, or simply Cihui), has sponsored projects for schools in twenty provinces. Cihui’s founder, Yang Hong, who was born in Huizhou, Guangdong, suffered from persecution during the Cultural Revolution but decided to give back to society after becoming a phenomenally wealthy businessman. Although Yang is a layperson, he has developed very close affinities with monks in Hebei and Jiangsu, and his lectures on Buddhism generate the kind of fervor that is usually found among the audience of American televangelists. Besides providing material help, Cihui also sponsors lecture series on Buddhism in major universities in mainland China. This is a good example of how philanthropy can in turn promote the status and influence of religion in China.

The Revival of Communal Religion and Local Welfare

Community temples are still the major provider of services, networks, and economic opportunities at the local level. Adam Chau's work on a popular religious temple of the Black Dragon King in Northern Shaanxi Province demonstrates how the temple association was able to accumulate enough funds from donations to build better roads, irrigation systems, and schools, and to undertake tree planting programs. Those philanthropic activities, in turn, help the temple to gain legitimacy in its negotiations with the local state and village community. Moreover, although hiring dance troupes and folk music bands for festivals does not seem to be directly related to philanthropy, those festivals with free performances not only bring the villagers together to celebrate, socialize, and relax but the money they spend to purchase incense and candles, and the funds they leave in donation boxes, bring a significant income to temples, part of which is then channeled into philanthropic projects. The Dragon King temple, for example, used the surplus funds raised through incense donation boxes to launch a reforestation project, which won international acclaim as the only nongovernmental arboretum in China, and built a primary school that, with generous funding from the temple and excellent facilities, quickly became the best primary school in the entire district.⁷

In a comparative study of villages in Jiangxi and Fujian, Lily Lee Tsai concludes that single-lineage villages that practice village-wide rituals or with an active temple association "provide broad community networks that village officials can draw on for public services."⁸ She notes that the committees formed to rebuild temples and lineage halls often evolved into "community councils" that organized religious, social, and philanthropic activities. Although villagers do not contribute to appeals for funds by village cadres, they "willingly and universally" contribute to public projects when solicited by temple boards. In one village, the temple committee's revenue was four times higher than that of the village government and had taken over all of the road building in the community. Local cadres often sought the support of temple boards for their projects and delegated responsibility for social services to them.⁹ Thus, one scholar has claimed that communal religion has become a "second tier of local government" in many parts of rural China.¹⁰

Indeed, throughout the 1980s and '90s, the Chinese state increasingly disengaged itself from the village level, providing few resources to cash-strapped village governments and Communist Party branches whose main function often came to be limited to the unpopular activities of tax collection and enforcing the one-child policy. Often seen as corrupt, local cadres had little moral authority to convince villagers to contribute to public projects. Temples have frequently emerged as alternative centers of resource collection and allocation, to which villagers willingly contribute funds, which in many cases are spent by the temple board on local infrastructure such as the construction and repair of roads, bridges, schools, and even basketball courts.

Although these examples show how temples could become the direct providers of public services offloaded by the state, other research has shown that temples could reinforce the accountability of village officials and their ability to provide public investments and services. A quantitative survey of 316 villages in North and South China, led by Lily Lee Tsai, concluded that village-encompassing temples and lineages are informal institutions of accountability that, more than any other variable, ensure governmental performance and the provision of public services by village state agents. Compared with villages lacking temple groups, villages with temples had higher levels of government investment in public services, a higher probability of paved roads and paths, a higher percentage of classrooms usable in rain, and a higher probability of running water.¹¹ Using several statistical instruments to determine whether these higher levels of public services were caused by other factors, or whether the temples were a consequence (and not a cause) of the better public services, Tsai concludes that “even when we control for level of economic development and industrialization, variation in bureaucratic and democratic institutions, and differences in the demand for particular goods or the cost of particular goods due to the variation in location, geography, and size, village temple groups have a significant positive effect on village governmental provision of public goods.”¹² Indeed, she even notes that the introduction in many regions of village-level democratic reforms since the late 1990s, in which village leaders could be elected in openly contested elections, was a less significant variable than the existence of an active temple in ensuring the village leaders’ accountability and efficient provision of public goods.¹³

Tsai defines *temples* as “solidary groups” in which members are “engaged in mutually oriented activities who share a set of ethical standards and moral obligations.”¹⁴ When solidary groups encompass all the members of the administrative village, and embed local state officials as members, the village officials will be bound by the moral obligations of the solidary group, which can reward those who serve the group well with high moral standing, or punish corrupt officials by giving them a bad moral reputation. This constitutes a system of informal accountability, in a context in which formal (democratic) systems of accountability are weak or nonexistent and higher levels of government are uninterested or unable to force accountability on village officials. Such village leaders have an added incentive to make an effort to provide public services, while leaders of the solidary group are willing to mobilize the villagers to cooperate with the officials, complying with regulations and voluntarily contributing funds for public projects. On the other hand, village officials who are not embedded in a solidary group have little incentive to perform, not being bound to a solidary group’s mutual obligations and moral standards (and being provided with few incentives from higher levels of government to perform). Temples are solidary groups that encompass all villagers and embed local officials within them, providing the common moral obligations and incentives to perform, cooperate, and comply.

Women and the elderly have always played active roles in Chinese popular religion. As socially marginalized groups, they benefit a great deal from participating in popular religious activities. Popular sutra chanting groups (*nianfo hui*) in southern Jiangsu, for instance, often consist of older women from the villages. Sutra chanting groups are often hired for ritual occasions such as funerals for a small fee (often cash is wrapped in red paper, called red pockets). By participating in those occasions, not only can the women who have otherwise no source of income get a small allowance that is at their own disposal, but they also gain an opportunity to socialize with other women from different villages and travel outside of the house where they are tied to arduous labor, day in and day out. Moreover, sometimes those sutra chanting groups organize pilgrimages to sacred Buddhist sites. This gives the women more mobility and provides moral encouragement to the family, since those trips are considered to generate karmic merit. Even though this function of popular religion may not be regarded as philanthropy in the modern sense, on a small scale and at the local level, it contributes to an important aspect of social welfare.

These examples show how religious values not only encourage charitable giving per se, but that this giving occurs in social situations that create shared moral norms and communal bonds. These bonds form networks and organizations that are distinct from the bureaucratic hierarchies of the socialist state and from the commercial transactions of the market economy. Religious groups thus constitute an important component of China's emerging "civil society" or "third sector," which, in spite of the restrictions imposed by an authoritarian political regime, manage to create a social space that is distinct from those of the state and of the market. Religious groups can create an autonomous social space precisely because their ethic of compassionate merit and philanthropic giving creates and reinforces new social bonds based neither on political coercion nor on economic gain.

The connection between civil society and Chinese spiritual values is emphasized by Pang Fei, a former philosophy student at Beijing University who founded the Yidan Academy, a grassroots NGO with thousands of student volunteers around China. These students gather on campus at dawn to recite the Confucian classics together, visit the elderly in their homes, and go out to schools in poor neighborhoods or villages to offer free instruction in the Chinese classics and history. They organize trips to the countryside to interview old people about their customs and traditions, and help them to set up rural academies to teach their traditional knowledge to the younger generations. According to Pang Fei, China sorely needs to develop a culture of public service and volunteering, and Chinese tradition, with its emphasis on ethics and duty to others, is the best resource to draw upon in promoting such a culture. Thus, he mobilizes youth volunteers to promote traditional culture, which in turn stimulates the volunteer spirit. Any type of action for the public good, he argues, must rest on a process of transforming people through moral instruction and example.

Notes

1. Quoted from the DVD *A Paradise on Earth—Tung Cheng Yuen founded by Mr. Lam Tong* (Hong Kong: Tai Tak Production, 2008).
2. Vivienne Shue, “The Quality of Mercy: Confucian Charity and the Mixed Metaphors of Modernity in Tianjin,” *Modern China* 34, no. 4 (2006): 411–452.
3. Joanna Handlin-Smith, “Chinese Philanthropy as Seen through a Case of Famine Relief in the 1640s,” in *Philanthropy in the World's Traditions* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 133–168.
4. Don A Pittman, *Toward a Modern Chinese Buddhism: Taixu's Reforms* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001).
5. Bernard Formoso, *De Jiao, a Religious Movement in Contemporary China and Overseas: Purple Qi from the East* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2010).
6. Prasenjit Duara, *Sovereignty and Authenticity: Manchukuo and the East Asian Modern* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 103–104.
7. Adam Yuet Chau, *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2005).
8. Lily L. Tsai, “Cadres, Temple and Lineage Institutions, and Governance in Rural China,” *China Journal* 48 (2002): 1–27, 9.
9. Tsai, “Cadres, Temples,” 21–23.
10. Kenneth Dean, “Local Communal Religion in Contemporary South-East China,” *China Quarterly* 174 (2003): 338–358.
11. Lily L. Tsai, *Accountability without Democracy; Solidary Groups and Public Goods Provision in Rural China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
12. Tsai, *Accountability*, 130.
13. *Ibid.*, 187–228.
14. *Ibid.*, 12.