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Merit and Mothering: Women and Social Welfare in Taiwanese Buddhism

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Thirty years ago the Buddhist Compassion Relief Foundation (Gīji Gongdehui, hereafter Ciji) was virtually unknown.1 Lost in the backwater of Taiwan’s eastern coast, the group began in 1966 with a nun, five disciples, and thirty housewives who contributed pin money of NT $0.50 each day (just over a penny at that time) to help supplement medical fees for the poor. The nuns sewed children’s shoes to generate a little more income, and their monthly total of funds available for charity was under NT $1,200 (about US $30 at that time). Today Ciji is the largest civic organization in Taiwan, claiming 4 million members worldwide in 1994, and nearly 20 percent of Taiwan’s population. It gives away well over US $20 million in charity each year, runs a state-of-the-art hospital, and has branches in fourteen countries. It has aided flood victims in the People’s Republic of China, famine sufferers in Ethiopia, and the poor in Naples.2 Ciji grew slowly but steadily during its first two decades, from the

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1They are officially registered in the United States as the “Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu-Chi Foundation.”

2See Lu (1991, 1997) for some of the only scholarly studies of this group in English. Chang (1996) has a more detailed and recent Chinese bibliography. We first began research on the group in 1992 when Weller visited the Hualian headquarters, interviewed Zhen­gyan, and began to collect Ciji publications. We jointly interviewed her again in 1993, and attended a large meeting at the Taipei branch headquarters. Since then Huang has conducted participant-observation research with the New York and Boston branches, where she has interviewed all core members. She also participated in a retreat at the Hualian headquarters in 1995.
original thirty women in 1966 to about 100,000 twenty years later. Its membership since then, however, has skyrocketed, surpassing a million in 1990, doubling that in 1992, and doubling again in 1994.

The leadership and perhaps 80 percent of the members are women, which is very unusual for an organization on this scale in Taiwan. The special appeal to women and the rapid growth of this organization during the late 1980s—exactly the period of Taiwan’s transition into a relatively wealthy economy and a relatively democratic polity—raise a number of questions, especially when viewed comparatively. Why are Taiwanese women so interested in Buddhist charity, and how does Ciji relate to the kinds of new religious organizations that have developed elsewhere? Why has such a group shot to prominence only in the last decade in Taiwan?

In some ways, Ciji is simply the latest reincarnation of a long line of popularizing Buddhist movements in China. Like those movements, it has a charismatic leader who offers a worldly version of Buddhism, allowing people to pursue religious ideals without leaving their families and joining monastic orders. Yet in some ways it is also quite new, especially in its translation of the bodhisattva ideal into a goal of broad charity—just the reverse, after all, of traditional Buddhist begging—and in its particular appeal to women. Its striking growth in the 1980s also calls out for explanation. Why, during this period of market triumph, did people turn to an organization that opposes consumption and promotes nonmarket distribution of resources through charity? As we will discuss, there is a striking resemblance to the numerous women’s Christian charitable organizations in nineteenth-century Europe and North America, which also offered their “ladies bountiful” a public religious platform through good works, and also during a period of market expansion. Does capitalist development somehow foster women’s charitable groups?

This essay will explore various possible explanations for the rapid rise of this group, for its differential appeal to women, and for its emphasis on charity. In some ways, as we discuss below, Ciji does indeed respond to many of the same pressures and opportunities that some American and European women experienced over a century ago. New wealth has freed them from many earlier responsibilities for housework and child care, yet a limited job market and a morality of feminine propriety restrain their options outside the home. At the same time recent urbanization and the dominance of market transactions have led to a feeling that community values have been lost to individual self-interest, and that many husbands are being lost to a new world of business and bars. Both cases brought the independent discovery of similar solutions to modernity’s crisis of values for newly urban, middle-class women. Yet just as Taiwan has not simply reproduced Western market development, its women’s charitable movement is also not a clone of an earlier North America or Western Europe. The cultural world system has changed as much in the last century as the economic one. Ciji, for example, can borrow to some extent directly from current Western models of social welfare that simply did not exist in the nineteenth century. Perhaps more importantly, Ciji also rests firmly on Taiwanese and Buddhist cultural foundations. Its long-term implications for Taiwan are thus quite different from the comparable Western organizations, which are often seen as

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3There are still no exact figures on the proportion of women in the group. Lin (1996, 1) conducted a survey of the core group of “commissioners.” Of her sample of 500, 157 people responded, of whom 88.5 percent were women. There may be a gender bias in who chose to respond, but the figure corresponds to Lin’s and our impressions based on participant observation.

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4Yin the Buddhist
precursors of the women's rights movement. Such a movement already exists in Taiwan. As we will discuss, Ciji's significance will more likely lie in its reanimation of Taiwanese Buddhism and its pioneering role in forging a new public sphere in Taiwan's transition from authoritarian rule.

A Brief History of Ciji

Leadership

Ciji is very much the creation of its founder, the Ven. Zhengyan. Zhengyan is the daughter of a middle-class family in the central city of Taizhong. Ciji literature describes how, at age 16 (in 1953), she took an oath to the Bodhisattva Guanyin that she would become a lay Buddhist for twelve years if her mother recovered from a serious illness (Faun 1991, Ciji n.d.). Guanyin granted the prayer. Several years later, when she was 24, her father died from a stroke and she felt some sense of responsibility. As a result, and against her mother's wishes, she left home to become a nun. No Buddhists would accept her vows without her family's permission, however, and her mother brought her home again. She left again the next year, and headed for the quiet of Hualian, on Taiwan's poor east coast. After wandering around various temples for several years, she finally took her vows in 1963, under a well-known secularizing and reformist monk named Yinshun.

The tale so far resonates with several important religious themes in China. The filial daughter offering to sacrifice herself for her mother's health recalls the "Twenty-Four Tales of Filial Piety," through which every child learns about exemplars of overwhelmingly filial behavior, including some similar sacrifices. One child in these tales, for example, cuts off a piece of his own flesh to serve as medicine for a deathly ill mother. In addition, the idea of taking vows to deities in exchange for divine help is a common demonstration of loyalty.

Yet the disobedience to Zhengyan's mother that followed strikes even stronger chords, since it reflects the stories of many goddesses who left home, remained unmarried against their parents' wishes, or never gave birth. Miaoshan (an incarnation of Guanyin), for example, refused to marry so that she could pursue a religious path. Her father was furious with her, and killed all the nuns where Miaoshan was living. Nevertheless, when he was later near death from jaundice she cured him with a magic potion made from her own severed arms and eyes, to repay him for his love (Dudbridge 1978, 28–34; see also Sangren 1996). She then revealed her true form as the thousand-eyed and thousand-armed avatar of the Bodhisattva Guanyin, who uses all those eyes and arms to save all beings from the world of misery. Parallel kinds of stories exist for many other goddesses, including Linshui Furen (Baptandier 1996) and Mazu (Watson 1985, 295–96).

These stories are not simply a rejection of filial obedience, although they invariably involve the rejection of marriage. Each goddess performs life-saving acts for her family, in fact especially for the men of her family—Miaoshan saves her father, Linshui Furen her husband, and Mazu her brothers. Yet each also refuses her most basic Confucian obligations to produce descendants for her husband's lineage and to obey her parents. Each affirms a higher loyalty to universal ideals of saving all beings.

*Yinshun had made his case for religious reform in the early 1950s, but was silenced when the Buddhist establishment suggested that his position constituted leftist agitation.*
equally. Not all these goddesses are Buddhist (although all are associated with Guanyin in the minds of many Taiwanese worshipers), but they mesh easily with the Buddhist ideal of the bodhisattva who delays his/her own nirvana to save all other beings.

Rev. Zhengyan’s story contains many of the same elements, with her mother opposing the Buddhist calling and receiving the act of filial piety. Followers sometimes compare Ciji to the thousand-eyed and thousand-armed Guanyin, as when one said of Rev. Zhengyan that “when she moves one arm a thousand arms move, and when her eye looks at something a thousand eyes look” (in Chang 1996, 14).

This tension between filial piety and more universal loyalties has long existed within Confucianism, where Legalists pointed out long ago that a nation of properly filial sons could never field an army. The problem is especially poignant for women, whose filial loyalties are split from the beginning; they are both insider and outsider in all their families. Women are destined to leave their natal parents and to worship only their husbands’ ancestors. As wives they cannot show filiality toward their own parents, yet appear as a threat to their husbands’ families: they are often in conflict with their mothers-in-law over the loyalty of their husbands, and harbor emotional ties to a natal family outside the patriline.

As Margery Wolf (1972) pointed out, the solution for most women is to nurture their own “uterine family,” in which they are completely inside, and which will also satisfy their husbands’ demands for descendants. The stories of these goddesses, of Zhengyan, and of the successes of the Ciji organization illustrate a different resolution to this tension, in which devotion to a cause of universal welfare also satisfies filial demands. Women in Confucian ideology can become respectable only in motherhood, by fulfilling their husbands’ filial duty to bear sons. Guanyin herself, although unmarried and never a literal mother, is often shown holding a baby. This is not just to show that she will help deliver sons, but also sums up in a single icon an idealized women’s position in China—a devotion to the salvation of all through the image of motherhood.

Two further stories explain Zhengyan’s move from isolated nun to founder of an enormous movement. The first event was the sight of blood on a hospital floor—the remnant of a miscarriage by an unconscious aboriginal woman who was refused admittance to the hospital because her family lacked money for the deposit. The second was a visit from some missionizing Catholic nuns, who criticized Buddhism for looking only to self-fulfillment, while ignoring the larger problems of society.

**Organization**

These events triggered Zhengyan’s resolve to start solving social problems, beginning with medical care. She began in Hualien, a city in the poorest part of Taiwan, and paid special attention to the problems of the non-Chinese aboriginal population, which remains the poorest group on the island. She founded Ciji in 1966, with her original group of thirty followers who contributed their few pennies a day from their grocery money. Their early temple remains the center of the movement, and visitors can still see middle-aged women sitting, talking, and making small handicrafts. The movement emphasized pragmatic action in the world from its beginning. Unlike most lay and clerical Buddhist movements in Taiwan or China,

\[3\] In a few cases informants have indicated that they joined Ciji without telling their husbands, indicating that these tensions continue to exist.
they spend little time reciting sutras or chanting the names of Buddhas and bodhisattvas, and they do not encourage monastic life as a way of achieving perfection more quickly. Instead, they concentrate completely on building a Pure Land in this world through secular action.

These days a close look at that original temple in Hualian also reveals banks of younger women entering data at computer terminals. Ciji opened a modern 750-bed hospital in Hualian in 1986, and a medical college has opened more recently. Medical care remains a core commitment of theirs (they have even opened a free clinic in California), along with poverty and disaster relief. Monthly subsidies to poor families in 1991 amounted to nearly US $2 million, more than the welfare budget of the Taipei City government. This transformation from a handful of followers to a major multinational charitable organization occurred above all in the late 1980s, exactly the period when Taiwan’s booming economy moved the island into the ranks of “developed” countries by most statistical standards.

The umbrella organization (Ciji Merit Association) as it currently exists is headed by Zhengyan and has two divisions, the Ciji Foundation proper and the volunteer organization. The Foundation itself (with Zhengyan as chairman of the board) is a registered nonprofit in Taiwan, with a typical bureaucratic structure of a board of trustees and departments for various administrative functions. The heart of the organization consists of strategic committees in charge of the four main kinds of Foundation activities: culture, education (currently a nursing school and a medical school, with a university planned), medicine (a hospital, a children’s rehabilitation center, and a medical research center), and charity.

The main sources of funding and energy, however, come from the millions of Ciji members who have no official role in the bureaucratic structure of the Foundation, but who give their money and time to organization activities. Many of these followers, who flocked to the movement in the last decade are only “checkbook members,” whose commitment does not extend beyond monthly contributions. Yet Zhengyan has never been satisfied with that, and a large core of the movement consists of people who commit much of their time to organization activities, and who draw others in. Movement literature constantly promotes pragmatic activities over financial contributions. These activities range from adopting a healthier life-style (members should not drink or smoke, and they should wear their seatbelts) to taking food to the poor or sorting out recycled trash. Many women, some of them quite wealthy, undergo a long waiting list to volunteer for brief stints as candy strippers at the hospital.

In addition to their charitable duties, local Ciji groups meet regularly. Core members may chant a sutra together or gather in study groups to discuss how Zhengyan’s writings (especially Still Thoughts by Dharma Master Zhengyan) relate to the problems of daily life. The nuns and volunteers at the home temple practice the standard morning recitation (zaoke) daily at dawn, like most Buddhist clergy across Taiwan. The key events, however, are talks by Zhengyan (in person or on videotape) and testimonials by members during “communal cultivation” (gong xia) sessions (see also Chang 1996, 11). Zhengyan will sometimes talk about Buddhist sutras, but only as they relate concretely to the real experiences of members. Her most frequent reference is to the Fahua Jing (Lotus Sutra), which emphasizes the bodhisattva’s role in helping others achieve enlightenment. The discussion, however, always turns on concrete action rather than Buddhist philosophy, ritual, and text. The testimonials usually either retrace the speaker’s path from misery to happiness through joining the group, or confess continuing inadequacies. The constant theme throughout is the
remaking of individuals' lives through charity, and the striving of all to reach a kind of perfection that can never be realized (except perhaps by the Master herself).

Local offices are organized by county and city, with district leaders appointed from the central organization based mainly on seniority. At the most local level small groups organize activities in the community. Most of this ties to the charitable work of the Foundation. Local members, for example, will identify deserving poor in their areas, or directly deliver aid to needy households. Others organize recycling drives or pursue other environmental activities (Chang 1996). These local groups have freedom to pursue their own ends within the guidelines set by the broader organization. Foreign branches work in much the same ways.

A core membership of several thousand (again 70 to 80 percent female) carries the main weight, giving large donations, soliciting new members, and identifying needy families. They will also carry out other projects, from visiting nursing homes, to promoting recycling, to sweeping the streets. These "Ciji Mamas" wear a kind of uniform—a dark blue conservative qipao (the traditional Chinese dress) with a pin in the shape of a boat.6 The most dedicated are designated as "commissioners" (wei yuan). While even tiny contributions are enough to make one a member, the Ciji Mamas tend to be wealthy, and many of the followers are middle class. Sizable donations earn bureaucratic titles for members, culminating in "Honorary Trustee" (rong yu dong shi) for those who have contributed NT$1,000,000 (about US$40,000). There is a great deal of overlap between commissioners and honorary trustees, indicating that even women who donate very large amounts continue to do volunteer work (Lin 1996, 6).

Core members are expected to undertake a relatively ascetic life-style, often in contrast to the luxury these wealthy women have been used to. One testimonial from a member, for example, explained how she had lived in a happy family, with a maid to take care of the housework. She spent her time in daily shopping trips for clothes and by taking classes—in aerobics, flower arranging, and English. Every morning she gossiped on the phone to her friends; every afternoon she worried about what restaurant to visit for dinner, what to wear, which jewels to choose. She visited Zhengyan after the death of her father-in-law, and Zhengyan had typically terse advice for the pampered young woman: "Go see the poor." She described her first visit as follows:

I wore a tight skirt and high heels, navigating along behind my commissioner and team coordinator to visit a poor family. But I cried all the way home from my visit to the poor. In all my life I had never imagined or seen such miserable poverty. All I had cared about was enjoying my own life of luxury. I had never cared about others, never cared about what's going on in society.

Another member said in a testimonial: "I used to have closets full of clothes. None of them ever seemed beautiful enough to satisfy me. But now I have found that most beautiful dress. It is the one I am wearing, my 'vestments of tenderness and patience' [the dark blue uniform]."

Ciji also undertakes some environmental activities as a realization of self-discipline and thrift, but not as an expression of a larger love of nature. Not wasting is an end in itself for them, and their activities thus promote recycling, but stay away from

6The boat is the fachuan (ship of the Buddhist dharma), representing the universal ideal of saving all souls by metaphorically ferrying them to the shore of nirvana. There is now also a second kind of uniform with eight folds in the skirt, called the Ba Zheng Dao (the Eight-fold Path of Buddhism). This one is worn while doing volunteer work.
Recruitment and Appeal

Ciji recruitment is generally through established members, but the figure of Zhengyan herself has played an important role in the construction of identity for the thousands of most committed Ciji Mamas. We have already mentioned how Zhengyan’s story recalls the tales of many female deities, and how those tales resonate with the experience of many women. People are often simply pulled in by the enthusiasm of their friends. Even more important, however, is the charismatic appeal of Zhengyan herself. Zhengyan is frail, short, and sometimes taciturn, but the experience of meeting her or even just seeing her is clearly electrifying in many cases. Many followers trace their conversion to inexplicable floods of tears on first seeing her; others point instead to how her practical advice (in person or more generically) really solved their concrete problems (“Go see the poor!”), in contrast to the more philosophical attitude of other kinds of Buddhists. Supplicants wishing an audience generally go through the mediation of her devotees and then the nuns disciplined to the Master. Most of them, if granted an audience, fall to their knees at her feet, in a gesture of obeisance generally reserved for dead ancestors on important festivals in modern Taiwan.

Our interview with Zhengyan in July 1993 provided several examples. She was seeing people before her speech during one of her periodic visits to the Taipei branch temple, a huge building teeming with women in those blue dresses. As we came in she was just finishing with a baseball team of actors and staff from one of Taiwan’s major television stations, who had come to pay their respects. An entourage of several dozen listened respectfully to our interview, although none but the master spoke. Her comments to us were typically terse and general, and repeated two main points: that any social change had to come from changing people’s hearts, and that only actions mattered, not slogans. As we were getting ready to leave and Zhengyan was preparing to go to the auditorium for her speech, a family came in to offer, with trembling hands, a large donation in a red envelope. All prostrated themselves on the floor at her feet and were nearly speechless.

Many followers describe the power of their experience with Zhengyan. Mrs. Li, for instance, had been a checkbook member of Ciji for about three years when she visited the Pure Abode in Hualian (the spiritual center of the movement). She describes herself as having been an unhappy middle-class housewife, never quite rich enough, with a husband who drank too much and a mother-in-law who scolded too much. As she entered the Pure Abode, she burst into a crying fit so powerful that she almost fainted. The experience led her to make a lifetime commitment to Buddhism, an ascetic lifestyle, and charity.

Others are won over instead by Ciji’s concern for the real world. Mrs. Kang, the coordinator of the New York branch, for instance, had long been a Buddhist and piously attended temples, even sometimes taking part in several days of Zen meditation. But she always felt that something was missing:

7This strong sense of hierarchy appears to be relatively new. The relations between Zhengyan and her early followers are very close, more sororal than formal.
You know, temples are always separated from home, where you and your family actually live, and where your life really is. You may drop everything that bothers you for the time being while you are cultivating yourself at a temple. You feel peace of mind for that moment. But the problems come right back as soon as you return home, or step out of the temple and back into real life. . . . One day I got some tapes of the Rev. Zhengyan’s speeches. I was so touched by listening to her that I found myself crying in the kitchen. I finally found the master with whom I really wanted to work.

She, too, had been facing a family crisis; she was pregnant with her fourth child and her husband was out of work. As for many women, Ciji gave her a way of facing reality. Many of the stories of followers speak of alcoholic husbands, shrewish mothers-in-law, and disappointing children. Ciji teaches them to accept their problems, gives them a supportive group of friends, and offers new interests that give them a feeling of worthy accomplishment. It resolves their sense of powerlessness by offering power outside the home. At the same time, it defuses the domestic problems inherent in being a Chinese wife and mother by reducing them to karma or fate (yuan).

The charismatic leadership and the move away from monastic meditation to actions directed at lay people characterize a long history of popularizing Buddhist movements in China, from the Pure Land idea that people perfect themselves by repeating the name of Amitabha Buddha, to the millennial visions of the White Lotus sectarians (Overmyer 1976). These sects often attempted to move Buddhism out of the monastery and into the streets, away from sophisticated philosophy and toward actions anyone could perform. Ciji also quite typically downplays philosophical subtlety and does not urge people to take monastic vows. Yet it also differs from those earlier movements by focusing so clearly on the idea of charity as a way of improving karma. It focuses action on this world, allowing everyone to act as a bodhisattva. In essence, it urges middle-class women to extend their family values and roles to the wider society, and to forge a new identity as mother to the world. As one member said,

I realized that I used to love too narrowly. I had only two children, whom I was killing with my possessive love. And I was never happy with this aching love. But now I have so many children. I see everyone I help as my own child. I have learned that we have to make our mother love into a world love. And we will live a practical life every day! We will be happy every day!

Another, now an Honorary Trustee, expressed very similar sentiments:

My life was too narrow. I lived like a flower in a greenhouse, like a frog in a well. I never knew what the outside world was. Even though I might be a queen at home, what use was it? I told myself, I have to walk out from this small world.

In a sense, this is again that image of Guanyin holding the baby—the universalizing values of Buddhist salvation finally at peace with the particularistic values of filial piety and motherhood. This combination of an emphasis on action over philosophy, an extension of maternal love beyond the family, and support for dealing gently with problems at home has been one of the keys to Ciji’s particular appeal to women. It succeeded only in the 1980s in part because only then did large numbers of women begin to have the time and money to put into such an activity, and in part because a booming market modernity sharpened these problems for women at just that time.
Religious Choices for Women

The special appeal of Ciji to women is made clear when Ciji is compared to the many other religious choices available in Taiwan. Women have always played a major role in religion there. They conduct most of the daily worship of household gods and ancestors across Taiwan. The man's role is strongest at only the most formal and important ritual occasions—funerals, jiao ceremonies of community and temple renewal (where women are usually forbidden to enter the temple), core functions of large lineages, and similar occasions. Women, however, care for the daily needs of the ancestors, and for most larger household rituals. Yet these are also her husband's ancestors, by whose worship on her wedding day she marked the putative end of her membership in her own natal family.

This kind of daily household worship offers little more to women than housework does—perhaps the pleasure of a job well done, or the knowledge that they have contributed to the well-being of their families. Taiwanese popular worship has very few opportunities for roles in larger social organizations. People can join local temple management committees, or take organizing roles in large community rituals. Men dominate all of these positions, however, and none of them offer opportunities beyond the local community. Popular worship offers little to women dissatisfied with their role at home.

Buddhism, on the other hand, gave women a number of options long before the development of Ciji. Women always had the option of "leaving the family" (chujia) to become nuns, striving for perfection by leaving the secular world and its trappings of meat, hair, and desire. Yet this also always posed problems for women (and Ciji thus does not encourage it). Even the phrase "leaving the family" itself implies the greatest criticism of monastic Buddhism in China, its fundamental breach of filial piety (which requires bearing sons as much as caring for parents). Duty to family discouraged most women from this path at least as much as the rigorous disciplines of the monastery. In modern Taiwan, this option suffers from the further critique that it flees from real problems; it is irrelevant to the world of these women. The very this-worldly orientation of Ciji provides one of its most important attractions: Ciji leaves women both dedicated to the family and active in the larger world.

Becoming a nun was never an important option to the majority of Taiwanese women, but they could more plausibly consider joining lay Buddhist groups that centered around the singing of sutras. Many of these meet in community temples or in their own "vegetarian halls" (zhai tang, Weller 1987, 45-46). They offer women a world of their own, where they can take on organizing roles, and where they can develop a Buddhist religiosity without leaving the family. They sing together, often without understanding the words of the sutras. Some groups are also available to be hired by people who want sutras recited, especially for funeral services.

These groups offered women room for self-cultivation without the moral and personal dilemmas of becoming a nun. Their role in funerals and other services also created a small independent income. More importantly for most women, they also created a sense of accomplishment in a more public sphere to which they normally had little access. Still, such organizations existed only on a very modest scale. Their ties to local temples and the lack of any centralized organization left them inherently parochial.

In a sense, Ciji builds on this type of organization, but with two important differences. First, Ciji is an international organization that controls enormous wealth.
It creates a sphere of action for women which traditional Buddhist options could not hope to emulate. Second, Ciji requires none of the compromises with domestic life and filial piety that earlier Buddhism involved. Members are not urged to “leave the family,” but to solve familial problems. They do not escape to a tranquil world of self-cultivation (as even the sutra-singing groups do in a limited way), but instead write women’s domestic concerns and skills onto the world at large.

Some women also pursue their religious interests through the many pietistic sects that have also become enormously popular over the last two decades (Jordan and Overmyer 1986). These sects often center around spirit writing. A medium typically writes messages in sand, through which various gods can communicate with their followers. The resulting texts are recorded, and sometimes published. While these groups have roots in the White Lotus traditions, and occasionally grew rebellious earlier in their history, their Taiwanese incarnations prefer preaching a conservative morality. Messages from the gods tend toward commentaries on classical Confucian and religious texts, or general urgings toward proper values like filial piety and loyalty.

Many of these sects also honor a world-creating goddess called the Eternal Venerable Mother (Wusheng Laomu). She is another virginal mother to the world, carried to greater extremes than Guanyin holding the baby—the Eternal Venerable Mother literally is mother to us all, but without the pollution of actual procreation or birth. She is often portrayed as disappointed in her children, who have forgotten her and no longer follow proper values. As one sectarian text put it:

[Mother], thinking of her children with great pain and limitless sorrow, from the cool native land of utmost bliss has sent all the immortals and Buddhas to save the imperial [children] of origin. She sighs that they are lost in a “yellow millet dream,” and in pity has descended in person to save the world, sending down from on high books written in [her] blood. . . .

(in Jordan and Overmyer 1986, 262-63)

This idea has occasionally provided the seed for an ideology of cataclysmic world change in the rebellious versions of these sects, but in Taiwan it leads instead to a call for moral renewal. The Buddha Maitreya, who will usher in the new Buddhist age, is also popular in some of these sects. Maitreya offers a similar potential for revolutionary interpretation, which is also not stressed in Taiwan.

In some ways, Taiwan’s pietistic sects resemble the “new religions” that have become so important in Japan, beginning in the nineteenth century and increasing quickly in the postwar period. Both generally have central organizations, often spirit possession, and often some roots in Buddhism. Both appeal in part to people frustrated with their opportunities in life, offering an alternative form to achieve respect and position (Jordan and Overmyer 1986, Davis 1980). Like Ciji, both also have a significant appeal to women. The founders are sometimes women, and women occupy some leadership roles. Yet the body of the leadership remains male for the Japanese new religions and the Taiwanese pietistic sects. In contrast, women clearly dominate Ciji’s leadership—not just Zhengyan but all the core leaders are women (although Zhengyan’s brother is said to handle a large part of the finances). While all these groups have large female memberships, only Ciji appeals particularly to wealthy housewives. Davis (1980, 200) writes that the Japanese new religion he studied offers “a symbolic process for effecting a woman’s upward domestic mobility. It transforms singleness into okusan-hood, barrenness into motherhood.” Yet Ciji appeals above all to women who are already married, have children, and generally lead a comfortable
...ions could not leave the replicating world of day, but instead with their diurnal rhythm, but instead, pietistic sects (Jordan and medium typically with their medium, but While these grew rebelliously a conservative Confucian piety and loyalty, led the Eternal Venerable to the world, by the Eternal Venerable's return to the world, eternal Venerable's actual procreation to have forgotten...

...row, from the as to save the millet dream," from on high...araclysmic world leads instead to a...lar potential for...lications" that have try and increasing...ations, often spirit...people frustrated achieve respect and both also have a...women occupy...e for the Japanese...clearly dominate women (although...). While all these...arily to wealthy men be studied offers...ility. It transforms...appeals above all...lead a comfortable economic life. Ciji's appeal lies less in this easing of domestic problems, than in its ability to universalize women's interests through charity.

Again like Ciji, these other sects do not push people toward monasticism, but instead urge self-perfection through living a better life in the ordinary working world. Some, particularly the very powerful Yiguan Dao (Way of Unity), claim differential business success for their members. Zhang Rongfa, one of Taiwan's (and the world's) wealthiest men, attributes his success in the container-shipping business to membership in the Yiguan Dao.

Both Ciji and the pietistic sects can be seen as reactions to the perceived loss of communal values with modernity. Beginning with the Eternal Venerable Mother's laments about the deteriorated state of the world, the pietistic sects continually regret a loss of shared community values (based in a Confucianized idea of filial piety, loyalty, and benevolence) to a grasping individualism. Their language is rather different from Ciji's, but both see a dangerous lack of morality in the world, and both offer people ways to live their lives in accordance with higher sets of values. This crisis of values in modernity, where people fear that shared morality has become greed and selfishness, has been documented everywhere. People feel alienated from an increasingly bureaucratic world, frustrated at the decay of old social institutions, and lost in the pluralization of everyday life and values (Berger et al. 1973, 181–200). As Taussig put it in a study of Colombian religious reactions to modernity, "communality and mutuality give way to personal self-interest, and commodities, not persons, dominate social being" (Taussig 1980, 26).

Yet the differential appeal of Ciji to wealthy women lies in its differences from these other kinds of movements. The sects have very little to say about charity or a broader caring for the world. Their morality is instead more traditionally Confucian, urging people to act as filial children, and as moral exemplars in their dealings with others. The pietistic sects thus reiterate the old (male-dominated) ideals of Chinese morality, and do not emulate Ciji's thrust of women's concerns with nurturance onto the world stage. In addition, the sects are much more self-consciously philosophical than Ciji. For Ciji, only action counts in the last analysis. Core texts, in so far as they can be said to exist, tend to be stories about real behavior. For the sects, on the other hand, the core texts are commentaries on Confucian classics, written by various deities through the hands of their mediums. Partly for these reasons, the ratio of women to men in Ciji is far higher than for the sects.

Ciji's unique appeal to women in Taiwan stems from its universalization of women's family concerns. Women's work in late imperial China was theoretically confined to the domestic sphere. Even when they produced commodities, men mediated access to the market. External contacts of wives (neiren, "inside people") were confined to their natal families and to the other women of the village. For the men, the women were necessary to continue the line. Only the birth of a son would solidify a woman's place in her husband's house; fostering his loyalty would protect her in the years to come. There were thus two common images of how women related to...

...The only partial exception is Rissho Kosei Kai, one of the Japanese new religions. It includes group counseling sessions that are reminiscent of Ciji's testimonials, and an emphasis on social service, especially cleaning public places (Thomsen 1963, 125). Its members are also primarily women, although they are not wealthy and the group remains relatively minor.

...Sered (1994) has recently argued that the only widely shared feature of "women's religions" everywhere is a typical concern with domestic life, and above all with the experience of motherhood in societies that value and recognize that role. Ciji appears to fit her model well.
men: as mother (who was the nurturer, the crucial link in the continuation of the lineage), and as wife (whose suspect loyalties to the family and sexual manipulation of her husband threatened his filial devotion, and whose menstrual pollution threatened everyone). Many goddesses are built on the idea of nurturing motherhood; they tend to be known for saving people in distress, or for help with women's problems (conceiving a son, childbirth). Even the virgin goddesses who refused marriage capitalize on this image. Other beings capitalized on the threatening image instead; one often hears stories of female fox fairies (especially in north China) or ghosts (more typical in Taiwan) who lure men to a sexual death.

Ciji's breakthrough was to extend this positive ideal of womanhood beyond the family to the world at large without calling up the specter of the negative image. It confirms women in their family roles, yet also extends them beyond the family itself for the first time. Unlike many jobs or other public positions, which many women complain bring them into an inappropriate commerce with strangers, Ciji succeeds in combining a very traditional idea of womanhood with a very modern sphere of action in the world. The wealthy women who form the core membership often feel unfulfilled by their family life. Servants care for the children, and their husbands are busy cultivating business connections, but the women do not want to compromise their roles by entering the economic sphere directly themselves. Many Taiwanese women still speak of the importance of "simplicity," as opposed to the "complexity" of the business world. Ciji addresses all these issues at once for them.

**Ciji, Chinese Philanthropy, and the State**

Ciji is not, of course, the first indigenous philanthropic organization in a Chinese society. The imperial state had long sponsored public granaries and other welfare activities, and lineages had looked after their members since the Song Dynasty. Several specific developments in the late Ming Dynasty, however, more specifically recall the Ciji phenomenon: the rise of popular associations promoting Buddhist values (especially groups to save lives of animals, *fangsheng hui*), and the subsequent popularity of private philanthropic groups run by local elites and dedicated to helping the local poor (Brook 1993, 104–7, 185–223; Smith 1987).

There is little reason to think that Ciji is the direct descendant of these organizations. They do not form part of the story Ciji tells about itself, nor did philanthropy in this form much survive the end of the Qing Dynasty. It was replaced in the Republican period, to an extent, by a more explicitly Western model of philanthropy growing out of the missionary movement and then the New Life Movement of the 1930s. Such groups before the twentieth century were also entirely male; women had no chance of playing such a public role. On the other hand, there are some parallels with the late Ming—a great increase in the circulation of cash through the commercial economy and a pulling back of local elite organization from the state—that suggest Ciji is drawing on some of the same cultural roots of philanthropy, whose potential is being realized under partially similar historical conditions.

Smith (1987) argues that the late Ming rise in philanthropic associations responded in part to the enormous influx of Spanish silver at that time. Community-based philanthropy let local Confucian elites and merchants join together in a cause that justified the new cash as an answer to social problems. This strategy also created
a popularizing tendency in the groups, as merchants increasingly influenced association policies. Ciji also took off during a period when the commercial economy boomed as never before, creating both a surfeit of cash in many families and a fear, typical of market economies, that a world of pure commerce was a threat to community moralities. Charity, after all, is a fundamentally nonmarket way of redistributing wealth. The emphasis on an ascetic lifestyle also downplays the importance of commercial success, even as the organization depends on generous contributions for its survival.

The late Ming also brought the growth of what Brook calls “gentry society” (Brook 1993, 23–29), the beginnings of a partially autonomous sphere of action for local elites departing from the Ming state’s view of its own patriarchal authority. This occurred, in part, through the creation of Buddhist and then secular philanthropic associations. Brook also emphasizes the way that the newly commercialized economy made this possible both by creating elite interests independent from the state, and by building up enough wealth to carry out such activities. For them, “Buddhism mapped an alternative world, not just of belief, but of action: a world of associational undertakings through which elite status could be cast in high-cultural terms that did not rely on definitions handed down by the state” (Brook 1993, 316). Mutatis mutandis, much the same is true of Ciji four centuries later.

Ciji is currently the largest civil organization in Taiwan, and was the first Buddhist organization recognized as a legal individual (jaren) since 1950. Its dynamic growth throughout the 1980s led the boom in civil organizations of all kinds in Taiwan during that decade, especially after martial law was lifted in 1987. Rather like those late Ming associations, Ciji does not actively oppose the state; it just offers an alternative outlet. The Taiwanese government in fact is not at all displeased with Ciji, whose welfare activities fill an important gap. The late President Jiang Jingguo visited the headquarters as early as 1980, the government has offered some support for the hospital and the medical school, and the Foreign Ministry likes to have dignitaries to meet Zhengyan. With Taiwan’s recent democratization, Ciji’s massive membership base is also an irresistible target for politicians of all kinds.

Yet Zhengyan and her organization adamantly refuse explicit political activities or endorsements of any kind. Men in the Compassion-Honor Group (Cicheng Dui, a kind of men’s auxiliary to the commissioners, founded in 1990) must swear not to participate in politics and follow other proscriptions, such as avoiding alcohol. All members were forbidden from campaigning during the 1996 presidential election. While Ciji has never directly challenged government policy, it has taken its own course, often disappointing politicians of all stripes. Zhengyan herself preaches almost exclusively in Hokkien dialect, although she speaks Mandarin. The public use of Hokkien has been officially frowned upon until recently, and could be taken as support for independence in Taiwan. We have even heard her berate a wheelchair-bound supplicant for speaking Mandarin, a language now associated with reunification politics. On the other hand, Ciji’s gifts of aid to mainland disaster victims have been criticized by proindependence factions. Nearly every social organization in Taiwan has had to face the politics of independence versus reunification in the last decade, and language is often taken as a marker of loyalties. Ciji’s ambiguous position on these issues is consistent with its refusal to play politics, but also shows the complex political consequences of its actions.

Ciji is a classic civil organization, in the sense that it is an intermediate institution between the private world and the state, with a voluntary membership, existing in a legal framework that clearly separates social and state organizations. Ciji is a clearer
case of civil society than its Ming precursors, in part because state and society themselves are now so differently conceived. Both, however, are insistently apolitical, yet politically vital as central fields for the redefinition of self and morality.

Women and Charity: Comparative Cases

Wide-scale involvement of women in charity also swept across much of nineteenth-century Europe and America. There were more than 150 female benevolent associations in the United States between 1800 and 1860 (Berg 1978, 147), and 84,129 female philanthropic workers in Britain in 1893 (Summers 1979, 34). Like Ciji Mamas, these well-off women contributed their time and money to charity work—they visited the poor with gifts of tracts, money, food and clothing, and sororal advice. They supported their efforts by collecting individual donations, selling their needlework, and holding bazaars, just as Ciji members do today. Some, like the Women's Christian Temperance Union, condemned alcohol in ways that Ciji also recalls. The new urban middle classes fostered this new kind of woman:

The late nineteenth-century city was an ideal breeding ground for female clubs: a generation of women who at once enjoyed a new degree of leisure and agreed on their obligation to uplift and purify the world inside and outside the home, confronted a series of more-or-less obvious social problems. Virtuous womanhood came up against a distinctly virtueless society.

(Rochman 1978, 69)

Just as in Taiwan today, these nineteenth-century Western European and American women confronted a rapidly changing society perceived to have lost its earlier morality. All faced problems of rapid urbanization and the growth of a more market-oriented morality, and they tried to address these problems in ways that built on their status as women.

Both Ciji and the Western groups organized around religion, but rooted their beliefs in completely secular action. "They responded to Christ's call with the resolve to become useful: to do God's will by furthering the Lord's purpose for the world. Usefulness meant service, and women reformers dedicated themselves to a life of service" (de Swarte Gifford 1981, 297). In the early part of the nineteenth century, most women entered charitable work via the church (McCarthy 1990, 4). The goals of female philanthropic societies were "formulated in religious terms... The archetypal benevolent women visited poor women, bearing food and clothing in one hand and a Bible in the other" (Scott 1990, 37).

Relatively wealthy women formed the core of this movement, just as in Taiwan. In part, this relates to the increased leisure time of the middle class during the nineteenth century (Summers 1979, 37–38, Pope 1977, 296). In part, it was also an attempt to extend a class morality. Thus the Widows' Society (founded in New York in 1797) would help only temperate women who had not been unmarried mothers (Berg 1978, 147–48), and charitable day-care centers in France turned away illegitimate children, because accepting them would be "tantamount to encouraging sloth and vice' among women" (Smith 1981, 143; see also Pope 1977, 299–313).

These charitable organizations of northern French bourgeois women in the nineteenth century were meant as an extension of God's love and as products of domestic life (Smith 1981). Smith argues that the phenomenon of the benevolent
cases was a generalization of a unifying force, caritas—the "spiritual equivalent of the blood that bound families and tribes" (Smith 1981, 127). By "visiting," the women of the Nord extended caritas beyond a single household and into the social sphere. The female connotations of this generalization were clear—people considered charity to be "gentle as a mother, soft as a petticoat, and insubstantial as a piece of lace" (Smith 1981, 133). By the 1870s, these bourgeois women had embodied their power by running charitable organizations in the Nord, "firmly believing in caritas, but believing as well in the authority, order, and morality of domestic life" (Smith 1981, 137). At about the same time in the Western United States, various groups promoted a comparable Protestant principle of female moral authority based in purity and piety (Pascoe 1990, 32–69). The ideology of domesticity thus encouraged the social acceptance of women's charitable organizations as extensions of the domestic sphere. At a time when women were generally excluded from the public sphere, charitable organizations created "invisible careers" for women, offering them a kind of public power based in the affirmation of domestic values (Daniels 1987; see also Berg 1978, Scott 1990, McCarthy 1990, Prochaska 1980, Summers 1979).

Both Ciji and the Western charitable organizations appeared during times of rapid commercial expansion, and both appealed primarily to women by offering them a respectable role in the public sphere that affirmed their expertise in the domestic one. How can we explain such a great similarity across such a long span of space and time? Direct borrowing is unlikely to have been much of a factor. The Western organizations were extinct, or at least moribund, long before Ciji was founded.

There is a better argument, however, for a kind of partial convergence, a parallel evolution based on comparable changes in the social and economic environments. Both took place during periods of rapid capitalist economic growth, where women were closely associated with the domestic sphere and where the state itself took on very few welfare functions. Both, in addition, suffered from a perception of declining public morality that frequently accompanied the growth of market-based economies. The family (like religion) appeared in both cases as a last bastion of communal morality in a world of increasing selfishness and greed, where everything else had become a commodity.

Women's religious charitable associations address many of these issues at once. They reaffirm the higher morality of both religion and family, and they try to solve real social problems. At the same time, they allow women a broader scale of association, a national or even international stage on which women can perform without sacrificing any traditional respectability. By claiming the world as their family, these women greatly extended their power without fundamentally challenging the social order.

These striking similarities between Ciji and the nineteenth-century groups, separated by a century and by half a world, should not distract us from the equally significant differences. First, Ciji has never been limited in principle to women. The thirty founding members were all women, the first recipient of aid was an old woman, and the current top leaders are women, but the organization actively recruits both men and women. Indeed, the European and American groups also differed significantly among themselves. The groups Pascoe (1990) studied varied in how they approached problems like soliciting government support, reconciling feelings of gender unity with real cultural and class differences, or dealing with male church authorities. Charitable women in Salt Lake City, for example, opposed women's suffrage because they wanted to limit the Mormon vote as part of their campaign against polygamy. Other groups supported it.
men and women. Men make up a significant minority, and frequently offer their testimony. The Western organizations, in contrast, were usually made up solely of women (although sometimes supervised by men). Second, Ciji’s organizational techniques, less strident style, and political timing have allowed it to develop into a mass movement on a scale not approached by the groups in Europe and North America. Third, Ciji draws on generally Chinese and specifically Buddhist traditions. When Ciji followers help the needy, they are inspired in part by the bodhisattva ideal of saving others before attaining nirvana for oneself, and by the typical image of Chinese goddesses as nurturing and universalistic (instead of the bureaucratic and localist character of many male deities). The openness to both genders also draws in part on Buddhist universalism, in which the strong gender split of the nineteenth-century organizations makes little sense.

Finally, Ciji exists in a very different social and legal context than the nineteenth-century groups did. Taiwanese women today have legal rights, voting privileges, and career possibilities that were still closed a century ago in Europe and North America. The global context of these charitable groups in the twentieth century, their place in the cultural world system, was very different from their Western sisters in the nineteenth. Perhaps as a result, Ciji is considerably less confrontational than some of the earlier groups had been. When the charitable women of England, France, and America confronted repressive welfare bureaucrats and legal institutions, they resisted, often through direct protest. Ciji, however, systematically avoids confrontation. Its environmentalism, for instance, remains tied to recycling, for which the government also campaigns. It will not protest against nuclear power or any specific factories (Chang 1996, 7–8).

The striking similarities between Ciji and earlier American and European women’s charitable groups matter because they point out the powerful shared effects of modernity, even in such very different places and times. The weakening of earlier communal structures under the expanding market creates both an opportunity for women by opening up new free space for social action beyond the family, and a perceived need for the strengthening of the family values that women can most claim as their own. Yet the differences between the two kinds of groups are just as important, because they show that the development of “modern” culture in Taiwan does not simply reiterate what happened earlier in the West.

Women’s charitable organizations in Europe and America are often seen as the roots of later feminist and social reform movements, like the suffrage movement (McCarthy 1990, Scott 1990). They allowed women to develop confidence in their ability to organize and get things done (Berg 1978, Ryan 1992). These women identified with “deviant” women, seeing themselves as a category opposed to men (Berg 1978). At the same time, their original charitable functions were removed by an expanding professionalization of welfare and social work that eventually drove them largely out of business (Smith 1981, Summers 1979, Lindenmeyr 1993).

Yet here the differences between Taiwan and these nineteenth-century cases are very clear. Professional social work, after all, already exists in Taiwan, and so does a feminism borrowed directly from the West. The legal battles that awaited nineteenth-century European and American women are long over in Taiwan. The world has changed in the last century, putting modern charity in a new context. The significance of Ciji will probably lie less in its laying the ground for feminism (Taiwanese feminists see it as rather backward), but in the possibilities it creates for a revivified and worldly Buddhism, its practical transformation of the role of women outside the home, and its contribution to the growing structure of civic association in Taiwan. Its importance
may lie above all in its success as a pillar of the public sphere in a country whose authoritarian government powerfully restricted civil institutions until martial law was finally lifted in 1987. This is a striking accomplishment for a people whom many analysts felt had no cultural resources at all to build a civil society (e.g., Chamberlain 1993, Redding 1996).

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