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Japanese Influence on Taiwanese Buddhism

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Abstract

So far as can be discovered, before 1919 there were no Buddhist nuns in Taiwan. Now, however, Taiwan is famous for its nuns, who far outnumber monks. How did this come about? Between the two World Wars, several Japanese Buddhist sects proselytized in Taiwan. The Rinzai Zen was particularly active; they ordained some men but more women, and took some of those women to Japan for education. In particular, this was done by a monk called Gisei Tokai（東海宜誠）, who also established a（now defunct）Buddhist charity in Taiwan called Tzu Chi, like the current movement. Another link between this and today's Tzu Chi is a nun called Xiu Dao, now in her nineties; in 1961-2 she was the companion of the young lady who was later to found Tzu Chi and become known as the Master Cheng Yen. Perhaps because of this influence from Japan, Tzu Chi has adopted some features of the Japanese religion Risshō Kōsei-Kai.

The Japanese Creation of Taiwanese Nuns

My research suggests that it is the Japanese who were originally responsible for the preponderance of nuns in Taiwan. The Rinzai Zen sect instituted a campaign of ordaining Taiwanese. In 1917 in Kai Yuan temple in Tainan in southern Taiwan there was held the first ordination ceremony for monks in Taiwan; Tai Xu officiated.[1] In 1919 the same temple held the first ordination ceremony in Taiwan ever to include women. We have the following figures for ordinations in Taiwan, which were performed under Japanese auspices:[2]

1919	84 monks	79 nuns
1923	83	58
1924	8	50
1934	31	83
1940	16	41

These figures show that while initially the sexes were fairly evenly matched, the number of male candidates then declined severely, but female candidates were not in short supply. The Japanese said, according to my source, that Taiwanese women had very hard lives and should realize that they would be better off as nuns.[3]

In the 1930s there were 120 Rinzai Zen temples in Taiwan funded by Japanese.[4] Most of these seem to have housed nuns.[5] There was also a Japanese Rinzai hospital in southern Taiwan. In 1937, the Japanese counted 170,000 lay followers of Japanese Buddhism in Taiwan, and 56 Japanese Buddhist temples.[6] Twelve Japanese sects were preaching in Taiwan, the Zen sects Rinzai and Sōtō prominent among them.

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1 De Vido, p.14.

2 Fai-yan Shih, "The study on Social Status Development of Taiwanese Buddhist Nuns," *Hsien Chang Bulletin of Buddhist Studies*, vol.8, January 2007, p.60. This article reports that according to a Japanese government report dated 1919, **there were at that time no Buddhist nuns in Taiwan**.

3 Once the Japanese had set the ball rolling, others too made successful efforts to recruit and educate nuns. In particular, Jue Li, a monk from the Chinese mainland, but ordained into the Japanese Sōtō sect, played a major part (see Jones, *op.cit*., pp.51-2). It is noteworthy that Jue Li was a Taiwanese delegate at the Tokyo conference organized by Tai Xu in 1925.

4 Li-man Lin, "Interview of Genyou Nun (Miss Yuzhuo Huang): Nuns' Education in the Rinzai Sect Myoshin-ji School in Taiwan during the Japanese Colonial Period."

5 Unfortunately Li-man Lin does not make clear how many temples housed nuns or how many nuns there were, even approximately. But evidently there were hundreds.

6 Wang Jian Chuang, "Attempt to study the Japanese monk Gisei Higashiumi and his preaching career in Taiwan," *Bulletin of Yuan Kuang Buddhist Institute*, vol.3, March 1990, pp.357-382. Most of the information in the next five paragraphs is from Wang; the rest is from Lin. However, the name Gisei Higashiumi is a mistake by Wang, due to the problem of translation between Japanese and Chinese. The correct name for this monk is Gisei Tokai.

One Japanese Rinzai monk was particularly notable in this period. Gisei Tokai learnt Hokkien. He supervised more than one hundred preaching centres, which paid annual fees to the Rinzai headquarters in Japan, and he received an award from the headquarters for his activities. He also was advisor to the Taiwanese Buddhist vegetarian association. He founded a college in Taipei, called Zhen Nan Xiu Xin, for Buddhists（both clergy and lay）, and was its warden and professor; the syllabus included Mandarin and other languages, mathematics, history and geography. In 1918 the college was taken over by the Sōtō sect. In 1934 it recruited 120 students, and 30 more joined in the second semester, so that the college decided to employ three more teachers.

Tokai founded a hospital in southern Taiwan and was chairman of its board; the hospital included a department for teaching Mahayana Buddhism and correcting wrong beliefs. He also founded a Buddhist charity called Tzu Chi, like the modern movement. It raised funds through members called "commissioners"（*mu kuan wei yuan*）, who went round with begging bowls to collect donations; that today's Tzu Chi uses the same name for fundraisers, who operate in the same way, can hardly be a coincidence.

It is also of particular relevance to my theme that he recruited nuns whom he sent to Japan to be given their monastic education by the Rinzai sect, who gave them scholarships. In 1933, of the 29 graduates from the college in Taipei half went on to study in Japan, where they were ordained; though the college was in Sōtō hands, one gathers that it was the Rinzai sect which taught and ordained them in Japan.

After 1945, when the Japanese were for the most part replaced by mainland Chinese, many of the nuns who had been educated in Japan were re-ordained into traditional Chinese sects by BAROC, the organization which then had sole control of Taiwanese Buddhist institutions. They continued however to be in charge of nunneries, though they are unlikely to have discarded all that they had learnt in Japan.

Ironically, Japan has very few Buddhist nuns, and they are still struggling to gain any kind of parity with monks.[7] However, in the vast arena of Japanese "new religions," which covers roughly the past two centuries and millions of adherents, female leadership is a conspicuous feature. For instance, the religion Tenrikyō was founded in 1838 and led by a peasant woman.[8] Helen Hardacre writes that in the world view of Japanese new religions, the concept of pollution, including the pollution of women, is in general downplayed, and this gives women more scope to be religiously active.[9]

Thus it fits well into my general picture that some of the leading nuns of Fo Guang Shan have received their university education, or higher degrees, at Japanese Buddhist universities.[10] Since the

7 Paula Kane Robinson Arai, *Women Living Zen: Sōtō Buddhist Nuns*, Oxford 1999.

8 Helen Hardacre, *Kurozumikyō and the New Religions of Japan*, 1986, p. 21.

9 *Op.cit*., p.14.

10 It is relevant to remark at this point that Fo Guang Shan is reticent about the personal details of its members, so that to come by precise information is by no means easy.

Master Hsing Yun is now very old, we shall no doubt find out before very long whether any of these nuns, who are probably abler than his leading monks, will succeed to the leadership.

Sheng Yen, founder of Dharma Drum Mountain and the Chung-hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies, had some difficult years after arriving in Taiwan. Then in 1968, "at the age of 38, he began doctoral studies in Buddhist literature at Risshō University in Japan and received his LLD in 1975. He has more formal education than any other major Buddhist leader in Taiwan."[11] He studied Chan/Zen under both Chinese and Japanese masters, and has a clear Zen identity, but has about 300,000 regular followers, spanning Taiwan and New York, where for many years he spent about half his time.[12] His Saṅgha I believe to be quite small, and again to contain more nuns than monks. I do not know how his movement has been affected by his death, but I have heard that the movement has recently built a new temple in Taipei which is utterly Japanese in style.

Japanese Influence on the Current Tzu Chi Movement

On Tzu Chi I have far more significant data. It is almost entirely a lay movement, founded and headed by a woman, and at least its first generation of membership was preponderantly female – though the balance is now shifting. I have published a rather long book[13] on this remarkable organization; here I must confine myself to matters of Japanese influence.

The personnel and structure of Tzu Chi recall Japanese new religions. We may also detect Japanese influence in the fact that Tzu Chi is both tightly organized and extremely regimented, down to matters of personal appearance. There have been lay Buddhist movements in China, but surely none of them was ever so smartly turned out. In 1960, the father of Jin-yun（who later became Master Cheng Yen）died, which gave the first impetus for her to leave the household life. She took to visiting a nearby temple called Ciyun Si. There she became friendly with a resident nun called Xiu Dao（修道）. "Xiu Dao had been trained in Japan by Japanese Buddhists and she disagreed with some of the practices in Taiwanese Buddhist temples, which relied for their upkeep on revenue from services rendered. … [She] also claimed that there was a lack of discipline within temple communities." She thought that the Chinese Chan principle that a day without work is a day without food should be restored, and decided to follow it herself.[14]

In 1961 Jin-yun and Xiu Dao secretly left together and tried to lead an austere life by themselves in a remote area. In the end, Xiu Dao's health started to give way and she returned to her old temple. Now in her 90s, she is still living as a nun in that temple, with three followers.

Before meeting Jin-yun, Xiu Dao had studied in a Rinzai nunnery in Aichi Prefecture in Japan, near Nagoya, for six to seven years. She has told me that she was one of the recruits of Gisei Tokai,

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11 Richard Madsen, *Democracy's Dharma*, Berkeley & LA, 2010, p.92.

12 Madsen p.85.

13 Yu-Shuang Yao, *Taiwan's Tzu Chi as Engaged Buddhism*, Leiden and Boston, 2012.

14 Yao, *op.cit*., pp.62-3.

who took nuns to Japan for education in the 1930s (see p.18 above). I deduce that she had a considerable influence on Cheng Yen – though Cheng Yen has never visited Japan.[15] For example, she taught Cheng Yen that monks and nuns should live on alms collected daily; this original Buddhist tradition had been lost in China.

Though it is nowadays rarely if ever mentioned, I believe that Cheng Yen has been influenced by the Japanese lay Buddhist movement Risshō Kōsei-Kai, one of the "new religions" which gives central importance to the *Lotus Sutra*.[16] Attaching such importance to the *Lotus Sutra* is more typical of Japanese than of Chinese Buddhism. It is probably significant that in Tzu Chi the name of the *Lotus Sutra* is *Miao-fa Lien-hua Ching*, as is normal in Japan. *Miao-fa* means "Mystic law" and the Chinese never use this expression as part of the text's name. For Cheng Yen the *Lotus Sutra* is so important that every morning from 4 to 6 she gives a class on it; the movement is planning to publish the teaching given in those classes in a multi-volume work.

Another point at which we may discern Japanese influence is this. We have mentioned that some Japanese new religions are headed by women and that Tenrikyō was founded by a woman. That lady was believed to be permanently possessed by a divinity and so was herself considered a goddess. In Chinese Buddhism no woman can ever be a goddess in any sense. However, there is ambiguity in Tzu Chi about the ontological status of Cheng Yen, and in some ways she is treated as a kind of goddess, an incarnation of Guan Yin.

In Risshō Kōsei-Kai, "an applicant for entry … needs to be introduced by a 'god-parent', and the new member is called 'godchild'. As parent and child have ties of blood, those who join the society, as a group of fellow believers in the Buddha, are bound by the *dharma*-relationship. Therefore, the godparent not only introduces a newcomer, but "just as a parent brings up his child, continues to be the guardian and adviser of the godchild, a guide in the faith, and labors for his sound growth, the new member is introduced to the fellow members by his godparent, and gets new brothers, sisters and friends in the faith."[17]

An analogous system to this exists in Tzu Chi. Cheng Yen has introduced a new concept, *fa yuan*, meaning "*dharma* relationship," which is a bond between members of Tzu Chi. It is more important than *su yuan*, "worldly relationship." The latter ends at death but the former is eternal. The same applies to the pair of concepts *fa-qin* and *su-qin*: *qin* means "blood affection," and that created by kinship in *dharma* is more valuable than that arising in the normal secular way.[18]

Though it is normal in Buddhist monastic communities for monks and nuns to regard each other as brothers and sisters, and senior teachers etc. may be considered to stand *in loco parentis*,

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15 She has never been abroad because she has a weak heart and doctors tell her not to fly.

16 In Tzu Chì's yearbook for 1992-6 a photo of the chairman of Risshō Kōsei-kai and the Master Cheng Yen was taken while the Japanese chairman visited the movement's headquarters, and a very senior member of Tzu Chi has told me that the Master took a correspondence course with Risshō Kōsei-kai in her early days.

17 *Risshō Kōsei-Kai* [official handbook], Tokyo 1966, p.107.

18 Yao p.88.

this idea of *dharma* relationships among lay followers seems to go further than anything found elsewhere in contemporary Chinese or Taiwanese Buddhism.

There are similarities between how Tzu Chi and Risshō Kōsei-Kai carry out the recruitment and socialisation of new members. I have described how new converts to Tzu Chi are "invited to the local informal group gathering called *chahui*（tea party）held every fortnight at the converter's home or a neighbouring household … The meeting is normally led by the testimony of the senior members [to] the positive effects experienced after their conversion: the resolving of personal problems and weaknesses. Within this confessional atmosphere, the isolated new convert would be encouraged to disarm their self-protection and guardedness."[19] Risshō Kōsei-Kai has a similar practice.

There are further similarities between Risshō Kōsei-Kai and Tzu Chi. For example, the former has its own hospital, established in 1952, whereas Cheng Yen decided in 1966 to create a hospital in Hualien in eastern Taiwan, thus launching Tzu Chi as a medical charity.[20] Similarly both movements have their own school system. Another feature that Tzu Chi may have borrowed from Risshō Kōsei-Kai is that in its early days one of its chief methods of publicity was to distribute cheap printed leaflets. These features are more widely shared among modern Buddhist movements; but they do add up to a pattern of greater similarity than can be due to coincidence.

A striking similarity between Tzu Chi and some of the largest Japanese new religions is that there is no role for any clergy in the rituals and events surrounding death. Everything is done by laymen. Moreover, death is not regarded primarily as an occasion for mourning, but is given a comparatively optimistic interpretation. This too I have described in detail in my book.[21]

The "Silent Mentor" Programme

However, in my book I make no mention[22] of the remarkable way in which Tzu Chi encourages people to donate their bodies for dissection by medical students, and how all this is carried out. The cadavers are known as "Silent Mentors." The whole "Silent Mentor" programme is described in a fine article by Rey-Sheng Her.[23] Rey shows that although it has taken the whole matter much further, Tzu Chi has built on something started in Japan by what was called the White Chrysanthemum Society. This article seems so far to have attracted little attention, so I take the liberty of quoting Rey at some length.

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19 Yao pp.168-9.

20 Yao p.66.

21 Yao pp.94-8.

22 It had hardly begun when I was writing my book.

23 Rey-Sheng Her, "The Silent Mentors of Tzu Chi", *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies*, vol. 4, May 2013, pp.47-74.

"In 1870, under the Meiji Restoration, Japan's medical world decided to adopt Germany's medical science, including its study of anatomy. From the late 1930s to the 1950s, Japan used "dead travellers", people who fell sick and died by the roadside, for dissection. Many medical schools were reluctant to rely on such material for the practice of anatomy, as the wishes of the deceased could not be ascertained.

Then in this century, just when the medical world in the West began to consider the issue, Japan too started to adopt "respect for dead bodies" as the core value in anatomy education. The White Chrysanthemum Society (*Shiragikukai*) was established in Japan in 1971, with over 20,000 registered donors/members, who are recruited by appeal through various channels. Professor Tatsuo Sato, a leader of that society, commented on current practice: "They might wish not to be dissected, or on the contrary, they might be willing to. I assume most of them don't wish so. Though they are just lifeless bodies, they should still be shown respect. Such use would create a bad impression on the students, so this practice is not welcome. It would be hard to teach students ethics with those bodies. The bodies now used have all been willingly donated with the implicit message that 'this is to help you to become a good doctor, please use my body'. Such a message has a very good influence on the students."[24]

This is how the White Chrysanthemum Society operates. Whenever a member passes away, the family notifies the Anatomy Teaching Department. The professor on duty will then put on a funeral black robe, which is kept on the premises, and rush to the funeral. A token contribution of 20,000 Yen towards the funeral costs will be handed over along with a body donation agreement. After that is signed, the body will be delivered to the medical school for study.

Respect for the donors is emphasised. Before the start of each class, the students must observe a moment of silence as a tribute to the donors' contribution. In the classes, the teachers and students must hold the donors in high esteem. On the first day of anatomy practice, some of the society's members are invited to attend and explain why they wish to donate. The students bring a bunch of white chrysanthemums to the first class. White symbolizes mourning, the chrysanthemum denotes nobility. Led by the teaching staff, the students place the flowers at the monument to body donors on the campus. At the beginning and the end of each class, all present must stand in silent tribute. At the completion of the course, each student team places the body they have dissected in a coffin covered with flowers. At some medical schools, the students also help to collect the bones after the cremation. At the end of the course, the students summarise their experience in a book which they send out to the donors' families and society's members; they write of their feelings during dissection, whether their attitudes have been changed, etc….

In its early days, Japan's medical community was influenced by the Western way of thinking. Natural science was embraced with the belief that matter was the centre of the universe and that science education was to advocate rationalism. They deeply believed that rationalism in exploring

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24 3rd April, 2007; Her's interview with Professor Tatsuo Sato of Tokyo Medical and Dental University.

the physical world was the ultimate value in the quest for truth as well as the highest human quality. But by the end of the 20th century, the White Chrysanthemum Society began soul-searching. They proceeded to merge the rational thinking of science with Japan's traditional etiquette. Gradually, body donation is being accepted as a virtue by Japanese society. But the White Chrysanthemum deliberately removes all religious connotations and bases its belief on science. Its aim is not to help deal with death, nor to provide guidance in overcoming the fear of death. It also does not seem to emphasise the sublimation of grief through the donation process. Instead, its aim to maximise the effective use of bodies is based purely on practicality: in the spirit of Jeremy Bentham, the British founder of utilitarianism, they hold that the aim of all social and political institutions should be the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Not only do the students show respect; through donation the bodies have become objects useful to society."

In his impressive article, Her shows how, without detracting from the rational, scientific spirit here described, Tzu Chi has added to the proceedings, often at the Master's personal suggestion, features which indeed help those involved to "deal with death and provide guidance in overcoming the fear of death". This noble cultural edifice is built on Japanese foundations.

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