

## Book Review

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**Democracy's Dharma: Religious Renaissance and Political Development in Taiwan.** By Richard Madsen. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007, xxvi + 191 pages, ISBN 978-0-520-25228-8 (paperback), \$21.95.

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### Book Review

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When I finished the research for the dissertation that would become my book *Buddhism in Taiwan: Religion and the State 1660-1990* (Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), I knew that the end date of the subtitle pointed not to any natural node in the historical development of the book's subject, but only to my own need to wrap up the project and move on. Things were changing rapidly within Taiwan's Buddhist circles, and I wondered if someday I would need to revisit the topic in order to bring out a second edition that would bring the ragged ends of many stories to more natural conclusions.

The appearance of Richard Madsen's *Democracy's Dharma* may have relieved me of that concern. This book appears at a time when many of the nascent trends that I observed in the mid-1990s have come to full development, and may well signal the end of one chapter and the beginning of another. The three great Buddhist figures whose activities and achievements Madsen and I both report—Xingyun 星雲, Shengyan 聖嚴, and Zhengyan 證嚴—are now advanced in years, and Madsen's may be the last book that studies them as contemporary players on the Taiwan scene. The next book we see on Buddhism in Taiwan will very likely have to begin telling the story of the next

generation of leaders while assessing the careers of these eminent monastics as historical predecessors.

Madsen comes to the topic as a sociologist rather than a Buddhologist, and his primary concern is to analyze the place of certain forms of Buddhism and Daoism in the rapidly-altered political scene we find in Taiwan. He wants to show that the kinds of Buddhism and Daoism that one finds under the leadership of these three figures, i.e., the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Association (Fojiao Ciji Gongde Hui 佛教慈濟功德會), Buddha's Light Mountain (Foguang Shan 佛光山), Dharma Drum Mountain (Fagu Shan 法鼓山), and the entrepreneurial Daoist Enacting Heaven Temple (Xing Tian Gong 行天宮), have skillfully contributed to Taiwan's democratization by reconfiguring traditional religious practices in a way that fits people for citizenship in a newly emerged and still unsteady democracy.

Beyond that, he also wishes to point to Taiwan as an example of positive political and religious development in the modern world in order to counterbalance the more alarming trends toward religious fundamentalism and violence that feed into and off of political authoritarianism. The fact that Taiwan has moved, with the help of the kinds of religious forms detailed in this book, from authoritarian one-party rule to a multiparty democracy with relatively little bloodshed should serve as a hopeful sign that religio-political violence is not inevitable in this world. They could do this because they represent progressive rather than reactionary religion. (p. xxiii)

Chapter one, called "The Taiwanese Religious Context," lays out the political history of Taiwan since 1945, laying particular stress on the ruling Nationalist party's flight to Taiwan in 1949 and the resultant "mainlander-Taiwanese" tension, the lifting of martial law and the introduction of multiparty democracy in 1987, and the great period of industrialization and economic expansion called the "Taiwan Miracle." Both in the political and economic-commercial domains, the changing Taiwan scene demanded that religion adjust to modernity, but in such a way as not to lose their religious identities. For example, Confucian values such as filial piety had to be adjusted for situations in which the

younger generation might have emigrated to America. Rather than declare the fugitive children unfilial, the successful religious movements learned to define a kind of filiality that could be practiced from afar.

The next four chapters recount the stories of the four Buddhist and Daoist organizations listed above, and show how each, in its own idiomatic way, addresses the religious needs of a modern, mobile middle class. Tzu Chi allows scope for individual initiative in enacting traditional religious values in a modern, efficient way through its charitable activities. Buddha's Light Mountain provides rituals for the modern world and its peculiar crises. Dharma Drum Mountain provides opportunities for an elite Chan practice coupled with a completely modernized educational program. The Enacting Heaven Temple, appealing to the lowest stratum of the middle class, provides more traditional ritual practices, with modern organizational features and charitable activities clumsily tacked onto its religious vision rather than systematically integrated into it.

The concluding chapter provides the overall analysis. The author draws primarily upon Mary Douglas' social analytical categories of "group and grid." The former indicating the individual's stronger or weaker integration into a bounded social group (the strongest being one that is impossible to exit and the weakest being entirely voluntary), while the latter term indicates the moral and symbolic meaning system and situates the person in the social world and gives them a template for action (a strong grid providing inflexible social roles and rules, a weak grid giving nothing more than guidelines). Compared to the U.S., Taiwan's "group" is stronger (that is, people have stronger social ties), but its "grid" is weaker (the institutions that govern behavior are not as robust). The religious innovators who founded the four religious groups described in the previous chapters work within these realities, using the symbolism of family to tie their members together (Tzu Chi more than the others), but suggesting only guidelines for members' religious practices and behaviors.

This is what makes them "progressive" rather than "reactionary," and

gives cause for hope that religion can function positively in the world. The strong "group" aspect gives members of these associations reason to care about one another; the relatively weak "grid" makes their ethical standards more flexible and less authoritarian, and so not likely to give rise to a "crusader mentality" (p. 156), and thus they compare favorably with the more absolutizing moralities of western monotheisms. The argument of the book concludes on this hopeful note.

How helpful or convincing is this?

In my estimation, not very. The book suffers from a variety of defects from the micro to the macro scale. On the level of detail, this book presents many troubling signs of insufficient care and attention to detail. The English translations of Chinese religious terminology are literalistic and show no understanding of their religious significance. A few examples will demonstrate this: The term *shangren* 上人 is rendered as "Master" with a parenthetical note that it literally means "above person." (p. 16) In fact, it is a highly honorific title given to the most eminent and proficient religious virtuosi. "Saint" would be closer to the mark, but at the very least something like "superior person" would be better. Translating *Xingtian Gong* as "Enacting Heaven Temple," while not wrong, is clunky and fails to evoke the range of meaning of *xing* 行. The main practice of this temple, called *shoujing*, is translated as "pull out frights" (p. 104). Because the Chinese character glossary is woefully incomplete, I had to consult the temple's website to find the term. It then turned out that the author's translation was inaccurate; the term, written 收驚, should be rendered "to collect fright" or "gather (not "pull") up alarm."

This might seem trivial, but it draws attention to problems at the middle level having to do with the primary-source research behind this book. The first chapter claims that the author conducted extensive interviews and archival research, but the endnotes and bibliography give no indication of either. Indeed, outside of the chapter on the Enacting Heaven Temple, one finds no allusion to any archival source at all. Looking through the bibliography, in fact one finds only two Chinese-language entries.

Does this matter? I think it does. In its chapter on the Enacting Heaven Temple, the book describes the organization as a Daoist institution with strong Confucian overtones. However, the Xingtian Gong's website says that it is a "three teachings folk belief" temple, meaning that the temple itself considers Buddhism to be a part of its spiritual heritage as well. (行天宮是屬於儒道釋合一的民間信仰; see [http://www.ht.org.tw/religion/religion\\_in.htm](http://www.ht.org.tw/religion/religion_in.htm)). More use of primary sources and Chinese-language secondary literature would, in this case, have enabled the author to present the temple's own self-understanding.

Finally, at the macro level of analysis and conclusions, one finds problems. For example, the author refers repeatedly to the lifting of martial law in 1987 as the watershed that opened the field to religious innovation. While there is no doubt that this was important, there is no mention of the 1989 law on Civic Organizations. Prior to this legislation, the government mandated that only one officially-recognized organization could fill any given "niche" in Taiwan's civil society, and the only organization that could represent Buddhism was the Buddhist Association of the Republic of China (BAROC). The lifting of martial law thus did not open the doors to a proliferation of Buddhist and Daoist organizations; the 1989 law did that. The story left untold in this book is the way in which these Buddhist and Daoist organizations managed to grow in spite of this legal restriction.

As to the final conclusion, that the progressive religions of modern Taiwan present some cause for hope in a world torn by religious violence, two considerations call for caution before accepting it. First, it seems to me that we can only be sure that there is a juxtaposition of bloodless democratic liberalization and progressive religion. The causal relations are far from clear. Did these religious groups actively contribute to an atmosphere in which such liberalization could take place peacefully, or did they thrive because the process of peaceful liberalization could not give strong support to other religious forms? Which is the dog, and which is the tail?

Second, and more seriously, the claim is rooted in modernity and the particular political and economic situation of Taiwan. This being the case, then one must seek explanatory factors peculiar to this time and these circumstances. In the end, however, the author appeals to factors that have been true of Chinese religion since antiquity: a tolerance for religious pluralism and a non-absolutizing morality (p. 156).

The fact is that China has been governed by authoritarian rulers in the form of both emperors and Nationalists throughout its history. In general, they did not mind that people held particular religious beliefs; they *did* mind the formation of large groups such as White Lotus Societies and Falun Gong that could turn into alternative bases of power and sources of rebellions.

What strikes me as more salient is the accommodation that the religious groups detailed in this book have made with modernity. This accommodation has indeed come about through a skillful mixing of traditional values and imagery with modern technology and bureaucratic efficiency. For example, Tzu Chi has been highly successful in gaining donations of cadavers for medical training in part by appealing to the chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* in which a bodhisattva immolates his body as an offering to the Buddha. In Tzu Chi's hands, however, the pointless gesture of self-immolation has become the valued and highly rational act of donating one's body in order to provide society with better medical care. This is impressive, and does point to a truly new and modern development. It may be, then, that what this book gives us a clear picture of is not so much *Democracy's Dharma* as *Modernity's Dharma*.

To sum up, this book presents some valuable information and a few insights, but it must be read with great caution and in conversation with other critical scholarship on religion in Taiwan.