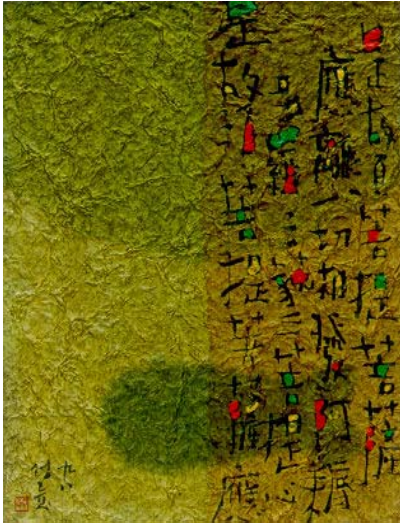


## Book Review

*Journal of Global Buddhism* 10 (2009): 49 - 55



Contemporary Religious Movements in Taiwan:

*Rhetorics of Persuasion*. By Kai-ti Chou (周凱蒂).

Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2007, viii+309

pages, ISBN -13 978-0-7734-5241-1 (cloth) \$119.95.

Reviewed by Charles B. Jones

Associate Professor

School of Theology and Religious Studies

The Catholic University of America

[jonesc@cua.edu](mailto:jonesc@cua.edu)

*Copyright Notes:* Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no charge is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format with the exception of a single copy for private study requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to:

<http://www.globalbuddhism.org>

## Book Review

**Contemporary Religious Movements in Taiwan:  
Rhetorics of Persuasion.** By Kai-ti Chou (周凱蒂).  
Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2007, viii+309  
pages, ISBN -13 978-0-7734-5241-1 (cloth) \$119.95.

Reviewed by Charles B. Jones  
Associate Professor  
School of Theology and Religious Studies  
The Catholic University of America  
[jonesc@cua.edu](mailto:jonesc@cua.edu)

Let us go ahead and say right away that this will be a very negative review, and that my last word on this book will be that I cannot honestly recommend it for any class of reader. I bring this up at the outset because I need to spend a little time looking at the circumstances of this book's publication in order to show that the author should not be required to bear the entire responsibility for its failings.

This book is, to all appearances, an almost entirely unrevised publication of the author's Ph.D. dissertation, completed in the program in theology and religion at Manchester University. A quick search of the internet reveals the dissertation's director to be a specialist in Second Temple and Graeco-Roman period Judaism with no apparent expertise in Chinese religions, China area studies, sociology, or communications theory, which together form the core components of this book. Thus, it is understandable that the preface that the director contributed to this book begins with the claim that the two religious bodies upon which this book focuses, The Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu-chi Association

(hereafter Tzu Chi) and Falun Gong, "are not widely known, particularly in the west," an assertion that anyone working in the field knows to be untrue. The dissertation director's apparent lack of any expertise in this area may help us understand some of the more glaring omissions in the book's foundational research, such as the lack of any but one reference to the work of C. Julia Huang, the leading scholar on Tzu Chi writing in English. We must conclude that, from its beginning, this project received inadequate guidance.

One also sees signs that the publisher failed to provide for adequate peer review or the editorial control needed to eliminate errors, such as when in several places the book refers to itself as "this dissertation" rather than "this book" (for example, p. 7) except in the final chapter. Given the lack of direction during this book's composition and publication phases, the poor results obtained come as no surprise.

Chapter one lays out the book's background, research agenda, and basic approach. Unfortunately, it spends many pages raising a theoretical question that has no bearing on the remainder of the book: whether Tzu Chi and Falun Gong fit the definition of "new religions" or "new religious movements." This is a question whose answer, whether yes or no, makes no difference at all in the subsequent analysis.

The author further contends that the most suitable method of studying these groups is to analyze the rhetoric of their discourse and see how it resonates with members' perceptions of themselves and their world. Among methods of discourse analysis, she chooses a technique called "fantasy-theme analysis" developed by Ernest Bormann. After haphazard accounts of Tzu Chi's and Falun Gong's histories in chapters three and four,

fantasy-theme analysis plays a central role in the author's presentation, and so it is very unfortunate that she never spells out this theory in this opening chapter, but only gives a one-paragraph declaration of her intention to use it (p. 32). This means that her subsequent use of fantasy-theme analysis, along with all of its technical vocabulary, will have little meaning for readers not already familiar with the theory. Since researchers in Chinese religion are not likely to be versed in communication theory, this omission detracts from the book's usefulness.

In order to understand the subsequent argument, I researched this theory myself. Apparently it is a way of analyzing the rhetoric of any social group in order to discover common themes and a concatenation of symbols that then form the group's "rhetorical vision." The process whereby this happens is called "chaining-out," and if an aspiring social leader can successfully deploy a series of symbols or verbal images and have them "chain out" in this manner, then the resulting "rhetorical vision" will take root as a universe of discourse to which group members will buy in, and it will give them both their worldview and their motivations for action, or, in Geertz's terms, their "worldview" and "ethos."

In a section called "Appropriate Access" (p. 32), the author describes her methods of participant observation. With both religious groups, but more especially with Tzu Chi, her means of access appear opportunistic and unsystematic. She states frankly that the bureau within Tzu Chi that grants research access gave her little cooperation, as a result of which she simply found a local college Tzu Chi fellowship and joined it in order to bypass Tzu Chi's own channels. This gives her an admittedly unrepresentative sample of informants. Furthermore, she acknowledges her failure to disclose her

purpose in joining. Though she deals with the ethics of this decision both in this chapter and in the concluding chapter, this procedure would not have passed muster with the research ethics committee at my own university, and it further detracts from the usefulness of the study's results.

Chapter two attempts to contextualize Tzu Chi and Falun Gong within currents of contemporary Chinese religious history. Much of its presentation of early history is based on very antiquated English-language scholarship (including Max Weber), ignores the extensive body of Chinese and Taiwanese scholarship on the topic, and adds nothing to the argument. The section on folk religion is especially weak and riddled with errors (such as giving erroneous dates for the Ming dynasty and completely misconstruing a fact given in a book that I co-edited with Philip Clart, both on p. 38). The chapter ends by asserting that Chinese religion in the modern period suffered from a "crisis of communication" that stemmed from five sources: political subordination, a retreat from social involvement after the Song dynasty, weak ethical and moral functioning, superstition, and its inability to help people create personal identities in an age of increasing individualism (p. 66-75). All of this sets the stage for the next two chapters, which present the manners in which Tzu Chi and Falun Gong addressed these crises.

The heart of the book is chapter five, which uses Bormann's "fantasy-theme analysis" to analyze the rhetoric of these two religious groups. In so doing, the author treats their rhetoric as literary "artifacts," and she analyzes those artifacts quite literally, as if analyzing a play, using the headings of "setting," "character," "plot," and "crisis" to lay out their chains of "shared fantasy." In the end, what the reader learns is that religious groups offer members a shared discourse. Some members

respond to it enthusiastically and become core members; others respond more weakly and become peripheral members. The sole factor determining these outcomes is, apparently, the degree to which the members find the discourse convincing.

The power of such an argument stands or falls on the author's ability to analyze the discourse of the leaders and adherents of these religious groups. In this connection, there are astonishingly few examples given. The author occasionally quotes from the founders of these groups, and more rarely gives direct quotations from informants. More often, she simply asserts that those with whom she interacted said this or that. A study purporting to rest on rhetorical analysis must give copious examples of actual rhetoric if it is to succeed.

Finally, the author seeks to extend Bormann's "fantasy-theme analysis" by using it to show why religious groups do not always succeed in "chaining-out" their rhetorical visions. She uses her own experience as a participant observer to do this, recalling that she frequently found parts of Tzu Chi's or Falun Gong's rhetoric unconvincing, with the result that she declined to contribute resources or participate in activities as directed (p. 240-245). She then correlates this with reports she received from peripheral members who felt the same way. She concludes that it does not always work because it does not always "chain out" and convince others to enter the religious group's rhetorical world.

This analysis will not do, and it will be useful to examine an alternative scholarly approach. One key lesson I learned as a graduate student was that one uses theories to interpret data; one does not use data to prove theories. One should have a variety of theories in one's toolkit and know which to use in answering the question at hand; one

should not declare allegiance to one theory and attempt to use it exclusively unless one's intention is to examine the theory rather than the data. In this case, the author's commitment to Bormann's fantasy-theme analysis keeps her from using other theoretical tools that, to look at her bibliography, she had ready to hand.

For instance, according to her discussion, the failure of Tzu Chi's and Falun Gong's rhetorical visions to convert her into a core member turn out to be their failure to motivate her to undertake certain actions or practices or to use her resources of time and money in recommended ways. It was not a failure to believe, but a failure to convert and adopt core practices. In her bibliography, one finds many works by the sociologist of religion Rodney Stark and his various co-authors. This being so, then the author must have known about his "rational-choice" theory, in which people make decisions regarding their religious commitments and practices based on a cost/benefit analysis. She might then have seen that, from this view, peripheral members commit only as much time and resources as they deem proper for the level of benefit they receive, and the plausibility of the rhetorical vision would be seen as only incidental to their behavioral choices. She also would have seen Stark's analysis of conversion, in which it is shown rather convincingly that conversions happen not because people are convinced by rhetoric, but because people in their existing social or familial networks are already members and they follow them in. Either of these analytical frameworks would have done a better job of accounting for the author's data and answering the very questions that she raises. Certainly, they could at least have provided a necessary balance to over-reliance on one analytical framework.

There are many other problems I could point to. The author frequently intrudes her own low opinion of her

research subjects in a derogatory and unprofessional manner (for example, p. 82). She inserts several complex and visually confusing charts into the middle of the book that are never referenced in the text and which had, in my reading, no discernible purpose (unpaginated section). The analysis in chapter five brings in Émile Durkheim's ideas of the "sacred" and the "profane" in ways that show no understanding of what he meant by these terms (p. 201). The list could go on.

And so regrettably, as stated at the beginning of this review, I find this book makes no contribution to the field valuable enough to offset its many flaws, and I cannot recommend it to any group of readers.