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Research Article

Shih Cheng Yen's Dazai jiaoyu 大哉教育 "The Great Lesson of our Times": Eat Vegetarian and Save the World

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English-language studies of the global humanitarian Buddhist Tzu Chi Charity Foundation, founded in 1966 by Taiwanese *bhikkhunī* Shih Cheng Yen, tend to focus on its structure and functions as a non-governmental organization rather than examine the *sūtras*, ceremonies, and rituals integral to it as well. Tzu Chi's "Buddhist" identity is thus usually discussed in terms of *renjian fojiao*, "Humanistic Buddhism." But to confine study of Tzu Chi within the boundaries of "Humanistic Buddhism" does not provide deeper insights into what kind of "Buddhism" Tzu Chi promotes and practices. To break this impasse, this article explores the "Buddhism" of Tzu Chi through a study of Cheng Yen's teachings called "The Great Lesson of our Times," which she presented in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. In these lectures, she explains why vegetarianism is the heart of the teaching, inter-related with centuries-old traditions of *jiesha*, *fangsheng* (prohibit killing, release life) and *husheng*, protection of life, and eschatological concerns about mofa,"Age of the Final Dharma," and collective karma, *gongye*. In sum, this study responds to Natalie Quli's call to uncover the limitations and biases of the "Buddhist modernism paradigm" and its tendency to privilege the "new and improved."

Keywords: Shih Cheng Yen; Tzu Chi; vegetarianism; collective karma; Covid-19; Taiwan; Humanistic Buddhism

English-language studies of the global humanitarian Buddhist Tzu Chi Charity Foundation (*Fojiao ciji cishan shiye jijinhui* 佛教慈濟慈善事業基金會; founded in 1966 by Taiwanese *bhikkhunī* Shih Cheng Yen 釋證嚴, b. 1937) have tended to focus on its structure and functions as a non-governmental organization rather than examine the sutras, ceremonies, and rituals integral to it as well.[1] One will hardly see mention of Buddhism in the *Buddhist Tzu Chi Charity Foundation Annual Reports*.[2] If Tzu Chi's Buddhist identity is discussed, it is usually to laud it as an exemplar of *renjian fojiao*, "Humanistic Buddhism."[3] For the purpose of its long-term organizational sustainability, Tzu Chi is developing the "Tzu Chi School of Buddhism" and "Jing Si (Still Thoughts) Dharma Lineage"[4] and promotes Cheng Yen and the Tzu Chi organization overall as the heir and transmitter of *renjian fojiao* (Shih De Shao 2025) precisely as a lineage within *renjian fojiao*, *renjian fojiao de jingsi famai* 人間佛教的靜思法脈 (Buddhist Tzu Chi Charity Foundation 2020–2021: 7). The Tzu Chi organization stresses a direct dharmic descent line from Shi Taixu (1890–1947) and his *renjian fojiao*, then further developed by Shi Yinshun

[1] For example, Laliberté (2004); Madsen (2007); Huang (2009); Jones (2009); Lee and Han (2020); and Reinke (2021). See DeVido (2022) for an annotated bibliography of English and Chinese works on Tzu Chi. One needs to read recent Chinese works for more in-depth discussion of the sūtras and rituals integral to Tzu Chi. See De (2011); Lin (2016); Shi and Tsai (2018). Also Yang (2025).

[2] This is a deliberate strategic move (also known as *upāya*, skillful means) on Tzu Chi's part because the organization needs to nurture relations with stakeholders from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds.

[3] For example, Pacey (2005); Schak and Hsiao (2005); Hsu, Chen, and Meeks, eds. (2007); DeVido (2010); and Reinke (2021).

[4] Cheng Yen's *bhikkhunī* disciples as well as her lay Buddhist devotees follow the "Jing Si Dharma Lineage" that interprets *renjian fojiao* via the *Lotus Sūtra* and particular its prologue, the *Sūtra of Infinite Meanings*. The teachings of this lineage are claimed to inform the "The Tzu Chi School": "a way of bodhisattvas in the world" who practice the "four immeasurables": loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity. Tzu Chi Dharma (2025).

(1906–2005), who became Cheng Yen's mentor in February 1963 and exhorted her to do all for Buddhism and for sentient beings, "*wei fojiao, wei zhongsheng*" 為佛教, 為眾生 (Shi De Fan 2025). Thus, Tzu Chi's official narrative is that Cheng Yen and the Tzu Chi organization have put into practice or realized, *luoshi* 落實, the ideas of her mentors.[5]

However, as Marcus Bingenheimer pointed out, the term *renjian fojiao* has very limited analytical power, if at all. Bingenheimer suggests two usages of *renjian fojiao* as a term: descriptive and normative.

> Descriptively, *renjian fojiao* emphasizes that the three treasures of Buddhism [Buddha, Dharma, Sangha] exist or at least originated in the human realm. The remaining four [devas; animal; hungry ghosts, hell; or five, counting the *asura*] realms may profit from the beneficial influence of Buddhism, but the human realm is the true field of its history, doctrine and practice. This view results in an emphasis on the image of Buddha as a human being, the Sangha as the guardian of a changing Dharma and the study of Buddhism as the study of the history of Buddhism as played out in the human world. (Bingenheimer 2007: 142)

While in the normative usage of the term "*renjian fojiao* is something that should be done. It is generally seen positively and often seems to imply novelty, a progressive force vis-à-vis an older 'traditional' Buddhism. It is used as motto for large projects such as the construction of hospitals, disaster relief, and the establishment of schools and universities" (Bingenheimer 2007: 142–143). He asserts that "[t]he term *renjian fojiao* does help neither to conceptualize nor to explain a number of important phenomena in contemporary Buddhism, such as the persistence of traditional modes of Chinese Buddhism (both within and without the groups that profess to follow the principles of *renjian fojiao*)" (Bingenheimer 2007: 151–152). *Renjian fojiao* is at most a label and is not a useful tool to fully understand what kind of Buddhism Tzu Chi is practicing and promoting.[6] In addition to "walking the Bodhisattva path," or creating 'the Pure Land' on earth," what are the other continuities between Tzu Chi's Buddhism and centuries of Chinese Buddhism and Chinese culture? An example of analysis confined within the borders of "*renjian fojiao*" can be seen Lin's study (2023b) entitled "Buddhist Edification in an Era of Epidemics: Tzu Chi's Promotion of Vegetarianism." This study "preached to the choir," as it was written for the Nineteenth International Symposium on the Theory and Practice of the Teachings of Dharma Master Yin Shun:

> There is no doubt that Tzu Chi's mission is a branch of the development of "Humanistic Buddhism," but it has its own unique characteristics (or it can be called "Tzu Chi model of Humanistic Buddhism"). Basically, "Humanistic Buddhism" takes the "Pure Land on Earth" and "Bodhisattva on Earth" as its ideals and directions for practice. Whether it is Master Taixu's "Buddhism for Life" or Master Yinshun's "Buddhism for the Human World," the core purpose is to promote the practice of Mahayana Bodhisattvas. Inspired by [Master Yinshun's exhortation to her to do all] "for Buddhism, for sentient beings," Master Cheng Yen also walks on the Bodhisattva Path of benefiting others and helping others, and is an example of "Buddhism for the Human World." (Lin 2023b: 25, n. 4)

He also writes that "Humanistic Buddhism" starts with caring for humans and ends with caring for all sentient beings (Lin 2023b: 25, n. 5). Though he does briefly discuss the Buddhist theory of karma and Cheng Yen's teachings on this, Lin chooses to focus on the humanistic and universal nature of values found in Tzu Chi's promotion of vegetarianism during the pandemic. The key point for Lin is how Tzu Chi promotes self-awareness and self-transformation of the human heart:

[5] For a discussion on the question of *renjian fojiao's* transmission and development in Taiwan, see Lin (2023a) who explores whether and how Master Cheng Yen and the "Tzu Chi Path" belong to the "Yin Shun School."

[6] Scholars often use the term *renjian fojiao* as though its meaning is universally understood, overlooking the significant distinctions between figures such as Taixu and Yinshun, and treating it as if it constitutes a coherent and fully developed lineage within Buddhism.

> Therefore, when discussing Buddhist teachings in the era of the epidemic from the perspective of "Humanistic Buddhism", the first priority is the self-awareness of the human heart, and even the awakening of the group, in order to achieve empathetic connections through wholesome karma, *shanye gonggan* 善業共感. (Lin 2023b: 49)

But to confine Tzu Chi's promotion of vegetarianism within the boundaries of "Humanistic Buddhism" does not provide deeper insights into what kind of "Buddhism" Tzu Chi promotes and practices. It is a hermetically-sealed, even hermeneutically-sealed approach, one that not wrong, but is incomplete, and surrenders to the strictures of Buddhist modernism.[7] To break this impasse, in this paper, I will explore the "Buddhism" of Tzu Chi through a study of Cheng Yen's teachings called "The Great Lesson of our Times"[8] that she presented in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic and explain why vegetarianism is the heart of the teaching, inter-related with centuries-old eschatological concerns. This study takes a comparative historical approach over the *longue durée* of Chinese Buddhist history, unfettered by the frame of *renjian fojiao* or Tzu Chi's imperative to create a distinct lineage or school as part of its organizational branding efforts.[9] In this way, the study responds to Natalie Quli's call for an interrogation of the "Buddhist modernism paradigm" that tends to privilege the "new and improved," and to uncover the limitations and biases of this metanarrative:

> How might we characterize Buddhist groups in ways that acknowledge dynamic flows inherited from the past—their blending of multiple histories, lineages, philosophical traditions, and cultural practices—rather than highlighting rupture? What effect might a narrative of continuity have in how scholars represent past and present Buddhist groups? (Quli 2023: 354)

The article first provides a historical overview of vegetarianism in the Tzu Chi organization and explains why the Chinese Buddhist teachings on *chanhui*, "confession" or "repentance," have a central place in the life and teachings of Cheng Yen, including "The Great Lesson of our Times." Then the article discusses Cheng Yen's "Great Lesson of our Times" in light of the long tradition of literature by Chinese Buddhist Masters and laypeople on the theme *jiesha, fangsheng* 戒殺放生 (prohibit killing, release life) and *hushing* 護生 (protection of life) since the Tang 唐 Dynasty. A main focus of the article is to compare and contrast Cheng Yen's broadcasted aphorisms during the pandemic called *Meiri yidingning* 每日一叮嚀 (A Reminder Every Day [2020], illustrated by Ling Wanqi 凌宛琪)[10] with Feng Zikai's 豐子愷 *Husheng huaji* 護生畫集 (*Paintings on Protecting Life*) published in six volumes at intervals from 1929–1979. Feng Zikai's work is the most outstanding illustrated work related to the "protection of life," *husheng,* in the twentieth century, while *Meiri yidingning* is the most comprehensive illustrated work on this theme thus far in the twenty-first century. Furthermore, though other Buddhist masters and groups in Taiwan and around the world carried out a wide variety of activities during the COVID-19 pandemic, Cheng Yen's *Meiri yidingning* is a unique creation that deserves a close look. This comparison between these two illustrated works finds shared themes such as karmic retribution by animals and human empathy with animals, but also differences in the case of *Meiri yidinging* that *insists* upon vegetarianism, with reference to eschatological themes of "Age of End of Dharma," *mofa* 末法, including the exhortation to stop killing animals in order to reduce individual karma, *bieye* 別業, and global disasters linked to collective karma, *gongye* 共業, which are absent from Feng Zikai's work. Cheng Yen's "Great Lesson of our Times" also echoes teachings

[7] McMahan (2008: 69) describes how late nineteenth-century Buddhist reformers re-interpreted Buddhism "as optimistic, activist, anti-ritualistic, anti-idolatry, and socially beneficial." See McMahan's (2008: 6–7) discussion of Heinz Bechert who was among the first to formulate "Buddhist modernism" as a scholarly category. A "Buddhist modernist" approach would be to interpret Buddhism as a philosophy or psychology rather than as a practiced religion; to focus on "the rational and the human, rather than the gods and ghosts of Buddhist cosmology's six realms, among other characteristics. With *renjian fojiao* used in either a descriptive or normative sense, humans take center-stage, with animals somewhat nearby, while gods and ghosts must fade away into the background.

[8] "[T]he pandemic is a catastrophe, and if this alerts our heart-mind to wake up and protect the heaven and earth and all living beings, this is 'The Great Lesson of our Times' " (Shih Cheng Yen 2020b: 001).

[9] Of course, Tzu Chi's organizational branding efforts include a "native Taiwanese" orientation that tends to play down continuities with the Chinese past.

[10] Ms. Ling Wanqi's artwork is reproduced in this article with her written permission via email January 22, 2024.

found in some types of Chinese morality books, *shanshu* 善書, about *mofa* and collective karma. However, the differences between Cheng Yen's teaching and previous Chinese works on *jiesha*, *mofa*, and collective karma (whether produced by sectarian groups or Confucian or Buddhist elites) are striking too: Cheng Yen's vision is informed by the latest developments in science and technology, including the internet and trends in the global environmental protection movement.

The COVID-19 Pandemic, Shih Cheng Yen's *Dazai jiaoyu*, "The Great Lesson of our Times," and Vegetarianism[11]

This article aims to contribute to the expanding scholarship on how leaders and communities in Buddhist circles worldwide responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. Obadia (2020) provides a "bird's eye" global consideration of whether Buddhism had unique responses to the pandemic compared with other religious groups suggests that Buddhism was well-positioned to contribute to psychological well-being as well as provide material social support due to long-standing traditions of engaged action in many Buddhist groups.[12] Salguero (2020) reminds us that Buddhists' repertoire of responses to the pandemic, such as healing meditation, medical charity, and rituals of protection, has deep historical roots. Yet Buddhists' innovations regarding their repertoire are also noteworthy, for example, in cyberspace.[13] Yonnetti (2024: 136) has a helpful overview of works on Buddhist initiatives (with focus on Tibetan traditions) during the pandemic, such as: distribution of protective pills and amulets; donation of funds and medical resources; provision of charity; and offering special meditation, ritual, chanting, and prayer sessions.

Besides Yonnetti's list, some notable efforts include the following view from Taiwan's pluralistic Buddhist landscape: Dharma Drum Mountain *Fagushan* 法鼓山 donated masks, other medical supplies, and money to fight the pandemic, and held extensive online mantra chanting and online meditation retreats as well as distributed protective amulets and Blessed Compassion Water to frontline health workers, both in Taiwan and around the world (Dharma Drum Global Website—Covid-19; Dharma Drum World Center for Buddhist Education). Buddha's Light Mountain *Foguangshan* 佛光山 donated oxygen equipment, PPE, and other medical supplies, helped with vaccination efforts, promoted vegetarianism for economic reasons, and held online mindfulness, prayer, and manta/sūtra chanting sessions, also in Taiwan and globally (Bau 2022; Lewis 2020). Stefan Kukowka (2022) highlights the still-popular Pure Land practices in Taiwan, focusing on the religious experiences of practitioners with the Hwadzan Pure Land Society during the pandemic. Yonnetti (2024) relates the reception and transmission, in Taiwan, of practices related to the deity Parṇaśavarī, "a protectress against pandemic illnesses," to explore how Tibetan Buddhism travels in the world.

Some other case studies on Buddhism in East Asian during the pandemic highlight the importance of ritual texts, like Huang (2022) who discusses the role of the "Golden Light Sutra" *Suvarṇaprabhāsa Sūtra* in China and Japan as a ritual text to protect the nation and to prevent or reduce natural disasters and details a methodology for its use to dispel suffering during the COVID-19 pandemic and prevent future disasters. And Tseng (2022) looked at the effects of mantra-dharani chanting on health carried out by various Buddhist groups in China and Taiwan during the pandemic. Other initiatives are illustrated by Nešković (2024) on the lockdown experience at Shaolin Monastery; Shmushko (2021) on Tibetan Buddhism in Shanghai; online outreach efforts by the

[11] About the term 大哉教育, *jiaoyu* 教育 means "education" and *dazai* 大哉 refers to the *Analects, Lunyu* 論語, *Bayipian* III. 4, 八佾篇 III. 4, *dazai wen*, 大哉問, which means "a question of great importance": 林放問禮之本. 子曰: 大哉問. 禮, 與齊奢也, 寧儉: 喪, 與其易也, 寧戚. Lin Fang asked about the fundamentals of ritual. Confucius said, "This is the important question! In ritual, it is better to be frugal than extravagant; in funerals, deep sorrow is better than ease." *Dazai wen* 大哉問 is a standard phrase in written Chinese that means "an important question or topic."

[12] Also see Schonthal and Jayatilake (2021), a general but excellent overview of how various religions responded to the pandemic across Asia, with focus on Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

[13] See the noteworthy innovative multimedia and interdisciplinary project on religion and COVID-19 ongoing at the Religion and Globalisation Cluster at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore.

Jogye Order of Buddhism in South Korea by Park and Kim (2021); while Graf (2021) looks at selected Japanese Buddhist temples experience from an economic angle that includes comparison with the situation after the March 2011 disasters in Japan.[14] In Sri Lanka, "[m]onks and nuns have suggested that the virus demonstrates imbalances in the environment, caused by too much greed and too little compassion. Addressing this requires more awareness and self-control"(McKinley 2021: 156). This is by no means a complete list and doubtless more scholarship is yet to appear.

As for Tzu Chi, there is no comprehensive study yet on Tzu Chi's actions to help Taiwan and the world during the pandemic.[15] Some topics beyond the scope of this article that deserve further inquiry include the following: The Foundation purchased vaccines from overseas sources and donated them to the central government in Taiwan; developed free test-kits, distributed epidemic relief equipment; and contributed front-line professionals and volunteers. In addition, Cheng Yen asked medical professionals in both Western and Traditional Medicine at Tzu Chi Hospital to develop a formula to fight the SARS-CoV-2 virus and Jing Si Herbal tea was the result, based on traditional Chinese herbal knowledge. Tzu Chi donated this herbal drink to thirty-three countries and regions during the epidemic.[16]

Though all Chinese Buddhist groups advocate vegetarianism, from the start of the pandemic, Tzu Chi was distinctive in that Cheng Yen preached "we *must* practice vegetarianism" as part of "The Great Lesson for our Times":

> [T]his is an opportunity for global education, to accept this wave of education given to mankind by heaven and earth. Nature is on guard against us, disaster is imminent, and awareness must rise and the Great Lesson benefits all living beings, to do good deeds to bring harmony to the world. Looking back from the beginning of 2020 to the present, the COVID-19 epidemic has continued to spread, the number of confirmed cases has continued to rise, and even the strain of the virus has mutated, which is the most severe challenge in the world. In addition, climate change has caused the four major imbalances [earth, water, fire, and wind] and disasters are frequent all over the world, alerting the whole world that all living beings share common karma!...The only panacea to eradicate the epidemic is keep a vegetarian vow and do good deeds. We must eat vegetarian, we must say it, and we must promote it. (Zhang 2021)

Figure 1: Ling Wanqi, illustrator

[14] Nešković (2024); Shmushko (2021); Park and Kim (2021); Graf (2021).
[15] See this article's earlier discussion of how Lin (2023b) interprets Tzu Chi's promotion of vegetarianism during the pandemic within a framework of *renjian fojiao*.
[16] See Chen (2021) and Shmushko (2024: 234–240). The reader should know that Shmushko's description of Tzu Chi includes some outdated information and the author translates "Jingsi Tea" as "Four Jing" Tea rather than the correct term "Purifying Herbal Drink" *jing si bencao yin* 淨斯本草飲. For a scientific study see Lu *et al.* (2022).

As a Buddhist organization in the tradition of Chinese Buddhism, Tzu Chi promotes vegetarianism. Monks and nuns in China, Korea, and Vietnam (of the Mahayana tradition) have historically been vegetarian. China had a long tradition of treatises promoting vegetarianism for the laity, promoted by both Buddhist monastics as well as followers of sectarian groups, in some cases linked to ideas of "the final dharma."[17]

Obeying the First Buddhist Precept of "No killing" and also practicing compassion for all sentient beings, all monastic disciples in the Tzu Chi organization and many laypersons are vegetarians, and Tzu Chi organization has always encouraged eating less or no meat. Even before the pandemic Tzu Chi promoted vegetarianism for all ages, including children, not only through written and audio-visual materials on vegetarianism, but through creative activities organized by Tzu Chi branches around the world such as workshops, exhibits, cooking classes, cookbooks, fairs, charity sales, and night markets, while the Foundation and University promotes academic research on vegetarianism. Moreover, Tzu Chi develops organic vegetarian snack products. Using "skillful means," Tzu Chi uses three terms for vegetarianism according to the audience and overall context: the classical term 齋 *zhai* (no pungent herbs like garlic and onions), 素食 *sushi* (no animal products and no pungent herbs like garlic and onions), and 蔬食 *shushi*, literally "eating vegetables." Tzu Chi promotes *shushi* activities as a "gateway" into Buddhist ideas about protection of life, *husheng* 護生.

Some early comments by Cheng Yen on vegetarianism that date from 1976[18] show a different focus than her recent stance. In 1976, the editorial called "The real meaning of vegetarianism and its health benefits" did not mention the "End of the Dharma," war, environmental crises, or global pandemics. Rather, the author (presumably Cheng Yen) made the following points: Western science has promoted the benefits of vegetarianism to health and well-being and many Westerners have turned to a vegetarian diet. She wrote that the First Precept "do not kill" is just one reason that Buddhists advocate vegetarianism. A *hun* 葷 diet does not only include animal flesh but also includes certain pungent herbs like onions, garlic and leeks. Quoting from sutras such as the Śūraṅgama *Lengyanjing* 楞嚴經, Nirvana *Niepanjing* 涅槃經, and Brahma's Net *Fanwangjing* 梵網經, Cheng Yen looked at prohibition of the "five pungent herbs" as being linked to health and well-being on one level, and on a deeper level, to purification and Buddhist cultivation. She explains:

> The real meaning and efficacy of vegetarianism is to benefit the body and mind, in short - First, to purify the six roots (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind) as the real meaning; to eliminate the six desires (caused by the six roots of the six desires) as the efficacy. Secondly, to purify the five aggregates (form, sensations, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness) is the real meaning; and the stimulation of five states of bodhi [enlightenment] (bodhi in the potential, bodhi in action, approximate enlightenment, further enlightenment according to capacity, and complete enlightenment) is the efficacy. We can summarize in four words: "benefit the body and mind." It can also be said that vegetarianism is based on nourishing life and[19] nourishing life is supported by vegetarianism. Therefore, due to the extreme progress of scientific invention in modern times, which has led to continuous innovation in medicine, people will link the relationship between vegetarianism and health more and more closely.

Evident in this passage from 1976 is Cheng Yen's interest in scientific and medical developments and her conviction that a vegetarian diet will purify the body and mind and is conducive to health and well-being. Cheng Yen does not refer in her writings to early twentieth-century Chinese Buddhism, in but at that time Buddhists already developed a syncretic discourse on vegetarianism that included Buddhist notions of protection of life,

[17] On vegetarianism in Chinese Buddhism, see Kieschnick (2005) and Greene (2016). Vegetarianism has a rich history in Taiwan among Buddhist and sectarian groups. See Jiang and Wang (1994), Wang (1996), Wang and Li (2000), Chung (2008), Lin (2009), and Lin (2012).

[18] *Fojiao ciji gongdehui* 1976. According to the Editor of *Tzu Chi Monthly* (email of Jan. 26, 2024), this Editorial *may* have been written by the Editors in 1976, Hou Weiping 侯蔚萍 and Chen Hsiang 陳香, but since "Editorials" were usually by Cheng Yen, it is possible that the Editorial Department only edited it.

[19] *Yangsheng*, 養生.

husheng 護生, and prohibition against killing, *jiesha*, with new ideas about animal welfare and a scientific view of vegetarianism. A recent study with a succinct overview of the discourses and practices of protection of life" and veganism/vegetarianism in the Republican period and in the PRC today, is Tarocco (2024) who discusses the "vegetarian activism" of Feng Zikai, Master Yinguang, Lü Bicheng, and Master Hongyi.[20]

We must note that in 1935 Taixu wrote about vegetarianism as a "special virtue of Chinese Buddhists ever since the era of Emperor Wu in the 5th-6th c. A.D" (Taixu 1935:1). He asserted that vegetarianism is a way to promote great compassion, cut off "murderous intent," eliminate the disasters of war, and save the world. In addition, he discusses three benefits affirmed "by science": 1. Evolution has shown that humans and animals are closely related, in fact, of the "same essence," *tongti*, 同體, so we should not harm our relatives; 2. Hygiene and health: Vegetarianism is better for physical and mental health because "when animals are slaughtered their dying cries are filled with sorrow, hatred, grief, resentment, and despair. These negative emotions permeate their blood, veins, and cells. Consuming their flesh will easily cause both physical and mental illness. Only a vegetarian diet can cure disease, prolong life and eliminate evil thoughts (Taixu 1935: 1)." 3. Vegetarianism is more economical than meat-eating. Taixu concluded: "The resentment and evil *qi* [21] resulting from butchered animals accumulates, and results in this world of sorrow and misery. Promoting vegetarianism can rescue people's hearts in a big way."[22] It is not clear if Cheng Yen is aware of the early Republican discourse on vegetarianism; she and Tzu Chi literature rarely mention historical precedents besides vague references to the "*renjian fojiao* of Taixu-Yinshun." Yet Cheng Yen's contains language and ideas identical to Taixu's (and others' in Republican China) regarding, for example, vegetarianism's relation to physical and mental health: "animals cannot express their feelings to us, nonetheless, when they face slaughter, their fear, anger and hatred emerge. We then swallow all these negative feelings ... it is enormously harmful to our body and spirit" (Kazer and Her 2021: 18).

The themes of health and hygiene continued over the decades in Cheng Yen's teachings on vegetarianism; however, due to dramatic global changes, additional themes emerged. Tzu Chi's vegetarianism campaign became broader and more intense for the following reasons: for environmental protection, to prevent zoonotic diseases, and for sustainable living and food security.[23] Around the new millennium, Cheng Yen's exhortations for her volunteers to help society gained new urgency in 1999 with Taiwan's devastating earthquake of September 21 and then with the terrorist acts of September 11, 2001. Such "world-shattering disasters were wake-up calls for the entire world" to be more compassionate and work together to reduce negative karmic conditions (Shih Cheng Yen 2001). Then came the US war with Iraq and the 2003 SARS epidemic, along with other disasters. Cheng Yen "associated the bad karma by humans harming living beings to the proliferation of" the SARS epidemic in 2003. "Tzu Chi launched prayer gatherings and promoted vegetarian fasting as a means of spiritual

[20] A later section of the present article will discuss Feng Zikai. For more information on these Buddhist figures, see Kiely 2017 on Yinguang's charisma and his Pure Land revival movement; Zu (2023b) on how Yinguang empowered men and women as Bodhisattvas-in-training, with vegetarianism as a major tenet; Liu (2019) on Lü Bicheng's advocacy for vegetarianism; Birnbaum (2016) on Hongyi, and Lu (2021) on "vegetarianism and hygiene" in Republican China. Tarocco's (2024) article also relates how in PRC today, vegetarianism is practiced by Buddhist monastics, lay Buddhists, and others inspired by health, ethical and environmental concerns as well as by "alternative lifestyles."

[21] *Qi* 氣, literally "breath," is a basic concept in classical Chinese cosmology and medicine with many meanings and will be further explained with relation to collective karma on pages 37–38. In this particular case, it could be rendered as "mist" or "exhalation" (per Schafer 1967: 102).

[22] The last sentence in Chinese is "Yuanhen liqi suo jie, nai xian beican zhi shijie. Tichang sushi, da keyi wanjiu shidao renxin ye" 怨恨厲氣所結，乃現悲殘之世界。提倡素食，大可以挽救世道人心也. Taixu (1935: 2). See more discussion later in this article about how the resentment of butchered animals is linked with disasters and wars.

[23] Lee and Han (2015) analyzed two major Tzu Chi publications from 1967–2010 and traced "when and why certain terms and discourses arose and how discourse on environmentalism, climate change and their related practices have changed over the past four decades" (316). Readers should note that the authors incorrectly name 經典雜誌 *Jingdian yuekan* as *Rhymes Monthly* instead of the correct *Rhythms Monthly*. For a helpful comparative perspective, see Zimmerman-Liu (2023) who discusses how Cheng Yen of Tzu Chi and Sheng Yen of Dharma Drum Mountain 法鼓山 have "updated the Chinese Humanistic Buddhist Discourse system in Tzu Chi and DDM to include pro-environmental dharma."

sincerity to show compassion to the epidemic victims and the livestock or prey animals hunted by humans" (Shi and Tsai 2012: 84).

Vegetarianism is inseparable from Tzu Chi's environmental protection platform, which includes extensive recycling programs (Ho 2016: 32–58).[24] Of note is the use of reusable utensils and bowls by Tzu Chi volunteers and participants in vegetarian promotion, including in the 2007 campaign of "Exert Self-Control, Restore Courtesy," which "emphasizes the four proclamations of self-discipline, diligence, frugality, overcoming hardships through vegetarianism and eco-friendly living" (Shi and Tsai 2012: 85). In 2008, there began the campaign of "Auspicious Seventh Lunar Month," in which the "Ghost Month" offerings, traditionally made with meat, were transformed into a vegetarian fasting month to show respect for the dead, along with environmentally-conscious reduction of the high resource use of livestock farming (Shi and Tsai 2012:85–86). Here we should also note scholarship that probes whether and how Buddhism and environmentalism have elective affinities in the first place. For example, Cheng 2014:38 argues that "[b]y turning the laborious work of recycling garbage into a spiritual practice, Tzu Chi synthesizes Buddhism with ecological discourse" and, see Lee and Han (2015) on Tzu Chi's "recycling Bodhisattvas."

Repentance and Vegetarianism

We now return to the focus of this article: perennial Buddhist themes in Cheng Yen's "The Great Lesson of our Times." The Buddhist teachings on *chanhui*, "confession" or "repentance," have a central place in the life and teachings of Cheng Yen and in "The Great Lesson of our Times." Repentance is a key practice for both monastics and laypeople, especially in Chinese Buddhism and cultures influenced by it (De 2011). Lin Shaowen explains:

> In Buddhist repentance, in addition to repenting for the faults of this life, more importantly, it is to repent for the karma of the past life. The so-called karma refers to the various obstacles in this life due to the various sins committed in the previous life. Buddhism tells us that we must be ashamed and repentant, reflect on our body, speech, and mind, and develop bodhicitta in order to eliminate bad karma ... commonly performed confessional sutras in Buddhist temples [in the Chinese tradition] include the Great Compassion Repentance, Samadhi Water Repentance, Medicine Buddha Repentance, Liang Huang Bao Repentance, etc. When we recite, think upon, and pay respects to the scriptures attentively, under the witness of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas, we vow to repent of bad habits and thoughts from past lives, eliminate greed, anger, ignorance, pride, doubt and other troubles and obstacles, and the mind will gradually become pure.[25]

The official narratives of Cheng Yen's life often mention the first time she came into contact with Buddhist sutras, prior to her becoming a nun. She was despondent after the sudden death of her father and even blamed herself for moving him after he suffered a stroke. She visited Ciyun Temple, *Ciyun si* 慈雲寺, and for one week, together with the resident nuns, she recited the *Emperor Huang Jeweled Repentance*, *Lianghuang baochan* 梁皇寶懺, for her father. She realized the importance of karma in our past, present, and future lives. Thenceforth, she began a serious study of Buddhism (Shih Cheng Yen 2019).

In order to repent individually and in groups to repent collectively, Cheng Yen teaches her students *The Compassionate Samadhi Water Repentance, Cibei sanmei shuichan* 慈悲三昧水懺. The purpose is to wash away "the dirt" of pride and greed that causes resentment and violence. Cheng Yen lectured on this sutra in 1980 and again for five years, from 2003 to 2008 (555 total lectures, later published in three volumes). This was due to the Iraq-Kuwait war, the war in Afghanistan, and the aftermath of "9.11" (Her 2016: 99, 102).

[24] An overall description of Tzu Chi's recycling programs rather than an academic analysis is provided by Kazer and Her 2021.Vegetarianism's benefits to the environment and health are highlighted, but not its Buddhist fundamentals on pages 32–58. A fresh etic view is Dung (2021), who studied Tzu Chi's recycling program in a comparative context.

[25] Translated by author from Lin (2021: 206–207).

In 2011, the Tzu Chi organization created a sign-language musical drama adaptation of "*The Compassionate Samadhi Water Repentance*," in which over 30,000 people, including Tzu Chi volunteers and professional performers, participated. Each performer vowed to become vegetarian for 108 days, repent for one's meat-eating transgressions, and reflect on the Five Buddhist precepts: refrain from killing; refrain from stealing; refrain from sexual misconduct; refrain from false speech; and refrain from intoxicants (Shi and Tsai 2018, Lin 2016: 34–58).

In 2020, when the pandemic spread across the globe, Cheng Yen lectured on "The Great Lesson of our Times" and constantly preached the urgent necessity of vegetarianism: "Keeping the vegetarian vow in a broad sense includes three aspects: verbal, physical, and mental. You must eat vegetarian food, pray for blessings, and do good deeds. You must avoid getting sick through the mouth. You must cherish all living things and abstain from killing, protect living creatures, and also take care of your own thoughts" (Shih Cheng Yen 2020a).

During the pandemic, Cheng Yen gave lectures related to "The Great Lesson of our Times," broadcasted globally via Tzu Chi's Da Ai 大愛 TV and other media formats.[26] Before we discuss the Buddhist themes in "The Great Lesson of our Times," I first explain how "The Great Lesson of our Times" and "A Reminder Every Day" transmit the teachings found in Chinese morality books and works by Chinese Buddhist Masters and laypeople about "prohibiting killing, and releasing life."

Shanshu, Morality Books

Morality books, that impart Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist moral teachings, refer to a large genre of books directly written by people or revealed by the gods through the technique of spirit-writing, variously called *fuji* 扶乩, *fuluan* 扶鸞, *jiangbi* 降筆, and *feiluan* 飛鸞 (Goossaert 2018). Morality books emerged as a genre during the Song 宋 Dynasty and were produced by popular organizations and elites alike.

> From the genre's earliest days, respect for life was always a major injunction of morality books, along with social and familial relationships, care for the poor and the weak, honesty in business, and respect for the gods. This encompasses respect for all forms of life, from tiny insects right up to humans, in a graduated way; all lives are considered precious, but not to the same degree. Thus, morality books often propose vegetarianism as an ideal and not an obligation (Vincent Goossaert 2018: 182)

Goossaert discusses general themes that recur in late imperial morality books, including 1) respect for natural cycles of life and the environment, 2) *jiesha, fangsheng*, prohibit killing and promote the release of life, and 3) exhortations to love and care for animals (Goossaert 2018: 183–184).

Lu Hwei-syin argues that Tzu Chi volunteers' life narratives, as they practice the teachings found in Cheng Yen's collection of aphorisms entitled 靜思語 *Jingsiyu* (Still Thoughts), are modern *shanshu* that not only exhort people to speak good words, do good deeds, and sow fields of blessings, as do traditional *shanshu*, but are therapeutic and empowering, as each individual narrates his/her redemption and rebirth through participation in Tzu Chi (Lu 2004). In this article, I focus instead on how Cheng Yen's teachings on protection of life and non-killing, promotion of vegetarianism, and linking the killing of animals with wars and natural disasters (often caused or influenced by human activity) resonate with teachings in certain apocalyptic *shanshu* of late Imperial and early Republican China, due to the common link with Buddhist ideas.

During the late Qing 清 and early Republic 中華民國 periods, China was plagued by disasters, caused by foreign invasions, domestic rebellions, and "natural" (but human-influenced) disasters such as floods and droughts. In those turbulent times, morality books increasingly warned not only that taking life affects one's own karma,

[26] For published collection of Cheng Yen's major lectures from May 16 to August 31, 108 in total, see Shih Cheng Yen (2021a).

but human collective behavior towards animals affects the destiny of the world. "During [the late eighteenth century] people's lack of respect for animal life grew into a major cause of anxiety about the end of the world," as seen in Lü Dongbin's 呂洞賓 revealed text *Jiesha wen* 戒殺文 ("Tract on Non-killing") of 1774 that claimed "killing animals is a direct cause of warfare ... so, if people stopped slaughtering animals, warfare would cease entirely" (Goossaert 2018: 186). However, warfare and destruction increased in nineteenth-century China due not only to foreign invasions but also to numerous domestic wars, most of all the devastation of the Taiping War from 1851 to 1864. Goossaert discusses the profusion of morality books at this time produced by both Confucian elites and popular religious groups. "This traumatic event was perceived by all actors as an apocalypse, with gods widely considered to be playing an active role in the battles.... Numerous texts revealed by the gods, or written and compiled during the Taiping war, posit a very explicit and direct link between the number of animal lives taken by humans and the advent of a savage war that was taking human lives on an unprecedented scale" (Goossaert 2018: 192).

It is also instructive to consider Li Shyh-wei's research on how in the late Qing and early Republican period, religious groups in China produced vast numbers of morality books about how Bodhisattva Guanyin can save the world in light of increasing disasters such as war, fires, floods, famines and plagues (Li 2017). These *shanshu* exhorted: To reduce one's sins and avert the end of the world, *mojie* 末劫, one must repent, practice vegetarianism, and release animals; do good deeds; pray to Guanyin; recite, listen, reprint, or gaze upon scriptures, and ingest mantras in Chinese medicine broth.

The modern publishing industry only increased the numbers and circulation of such books. *Shanshu* also circulated in Taiwan during the Qing Dynasty and Japanese colonial period (Song 1994). Charity and relief societies issued *shanshu* as they raised funds. *Shanshu* also addressed the perennial popular interest in health and well-being, broadly referred to as *yangsheng*. The Japanese colonial government in Taiwan worked with local elites via *shanshu* in a campaign to stop smoking, to take one example. *Shanshu,* regardless of who the publisher was, have always had a didactic purpose to educate the people, *jiaohua minzhong* 教化民眾 (Zheng 1998: 18–24).

This article will later discuss apocalyptic themes related to the "Age of the End of the Dharma" in Cheng Yen's recent teachings about vegetarianism. It should be noted, though, that in accordance with Cheng Yen's orthodox Buddhist stance that all life is equal, there is no "relative worth" of different types of sentient life as seen in some morality books (for example, oxen are especially cherished). Cheng Yen advocates for vegetarianism, which is not a common practice among all morality books.

Prohibit killing, release life

Since at least the Tang Dynasty, Chinese Buddhist Masters and laypeople have written many works on the theme of "prohibit killing, release life," for example, Su Shi 蘇軾, Lu You 陸游, Bai Juyi 白居易, Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅, Chan Master Yuanyun 願雲禪師, and many others (Sutra Pearls 2020).

> The doctrinal basis for nonkilling and the release of living beings *fang sheng*—that is, allowing captured animals, birds, and destined for human consumption to go free—is generally identified as the Brahma Net Sutra [the *Brahmajāla Sūtra* that elaborated upon the Bodhisattva Precepts].... Addressed to lay disciples of Mahāyana Buddhism, this sutra enjoyed a considerable influence in China for over fifteen hundred years.... Nonkilling and releasing life have a venerable history in China that dates back at least as far as the Sui dynasty (581–618), when fast days were promulgated and bans were placed on killing living human beings. Ponds for releasing life *fang sheng chi,* where fish were safe from human predators, which were to become a feature of most Buddhist monasteries

> and temples, were established as early as the reign of Emperor Yuan of the Liang Dynasty (Barmé 2002: 181–182).

For example, the twentieth vow of the Brahma Net Sutra admonishes disciples of the Buddha to reflect, "throughout the eons of time, all male sentient beings have been my father, all female sentient beings my mother. I was born of them. If I now slaughter them, I would be slaughtering my parents as well as eating flesh that was once my own" (Nicolaisen 2019: 293).

The Brahma Net Sutra continues: "All water and earth are our former bodies, and all fire and wind are our present selves; so freeing captive animals frequently will enhance life in every rebirth. Whenever we see animals about to be killed, we should do our best to rescue, protect, and relieve their pain and suffering; we should often teach, advocate, and explain the bodhisattva precepts to others and bring salvation to all sentient beings" (Dharma Drum Mountain Global Website—Common Questions).[27]

Fangsheng practices remained popular among all classes in China up to the twentieth century. Like many monastics before him, Shi Hongyi 釋弘一 (1880–1942), whom we will discuss below, lectured on the benefits of *fangsheng*: "could ensure the practitioner long life, health, the avoidance of ill-fortune, the birth of sons, and rebirth in the pure land of the western heaven" (Barmé 2002: 182). In contrast, Cheng Yen does not advocate *fangsheng*: the act of releasing animals may actually cause harm to the animal itself and to the local ecosystem.[28]

The sections above gave an overview of some major themes in morality books, such as "prohibit killing, release life," the importance of repentance, and the imperative to stop killing animals to avert the apocalypse, all of which, except "releasing life," are highlighted in Cheng Yen's "The Great Lesson of our Times." Now we turn to a comparison of Cheng Yen's "A Reminder Every Day" with Feng Zikai's *Paintings on Protecting Life*, with some specific examples to show similarities and differences between Feng Zikai and Cheng Yen on the theme of "prohibit killing, release life."

Feng Zikai (1898–1975) and his *Paintings on Protecting Life*

The best-known work in the twentieth century on the theme of *husheng*, or protection of life, is Feng Zikai's *Paintings on Protecting Life*, published in six volumes at intervals from 1929 to 1979. The artist and writer Feng Zikai was born in Zhejiang, was well-educated in his youth, and was molded by the New Culture Movement. He studied with Li Shutong 李叔同 even before the latter became the monk Hongyi and kept a close creative relationship with him thereafter. Hongyi was an educator, artist, Buddhist monk, and promoter of the Vinaya School.

Feng Zikai converted to Buddhism in 1927 with Hongyi, and in 1929, Feng published Volume One of *Paintings on Protecting Life* that he dedicated to Hongyi on his fiftieth birthday. Feng Zikai made a vow to Hongyi to produce subsequent volumes in approximately ten-year intervals until Hongyi's centenary in 1979. Hongyi passed away in 1942, but Feng fulfilled his vow to him, despite the very difficult socio-political and economic circumstances that Feng Zikai faced throughout his life.[29]

Discussions on Feng Zikai's *Paintings on Protecting Life* often focus on examples from Volumes One and Two, the ones on which Feng and Hongyi collaborated. After Hongyi's death, Feng Zikai worked with the monk Shi Guangqia 釋廣洽 in Singapore and three other calligraphers to complete the final four volumes. The final four

[27] For a clear account of how the concept and practice of *fangsheng* evolved from fifth-century CE to the early Qing in terms of what individuals and social groups were involved, their various arguments for "releasing life," and what types of "life" were to be released, see Handlin-Smith 1999.

[28] Similarly, both Shih Hsing Yun (Buddha's Light Mountain) and Shih Sheng Yen (Dharma Drum Mountain) discouraged the practice of *fangsheng* due to concerns with ecological conservation (due to effects of invasive species) and animal welfare. Nicolaisen (2019: 298–99).

[29] For more information about Hongyi, see Birnbaum (2016: 161–208). For more information about Feng Zikai, see Barmé (2002), Kao (2007), and Lin (2011).

volumes feature poems by Feng Zikai and others, as well as vignettes from popular literature, such as"tales of the miraculous" (*zhiguai xiaoshuo* 志怪小說).[30]

In addition to the profound influence of Hongyi upon Feng's thought and work, the philosopher, teacher, translator, and calligrapher Ma Yifu 馬一浮 (who wrote the Preface for Volume One) was also his mentor. Ma was not a Buddhist and did not discuss non-killing in the Buddhist framework of co-dependent origination, but argued for non-killing from his neo-Confucian point of view. He "emphasized the unity of all living creatures and averred that by protecting life one was, in fact, protecting or cultivating the heart-mind [he was]concerned with the nurturing of the"one heart" *yixin* and the rejuvenation of the nation" (Barmé 2002:184).[31] In the words of Francesca Tarocco, in *Husheng huaji*, Feng "devised a strikingly modern representation of what could be described as"multispecies ecojustice" that still feels relevant today" (Tarocco 2024: 127).

Selections from Paintings on Protecting Life

This article cannot discuss the content of all six volumes, but will select a few works that illustrate perennial Buddhist themes on protecting life.[32] Figure 2, a poem with calligraphy by Hongyi and illustrated by Feng Zikai, is the first plate of Volume One (Feng 1987: 1–2) and states the basic tenets of "prohibit killing, release life":

Figure 2: Zhongsheng, Sentient Beings
As sentient beings, they all share the same essence as I.
You should have compassion and pity.
Broadly urge the people of the world to release living creatures and give up killing.
To not eat meat is to love all living beings.

The next example is "Pingdeng, Equality" (figure 3). This is an especially interesting work with a number of texts that converse with the illustration:

a) one-half of a *lüshi* 律詩 entitled "Poem on the Prohibition of Killing," *Jiesha shi* 戒殺詩 by the Song Dynasty Chinese poet Huang Tingxian, b) the title "Equality," *pingdeng* 平等 given by the illustrator, Feng Zikai, and c) Constance Garnett's English translation of one line from a poem by Ivan S. Turgenev called "The Dog" (1878). Huang Tingxian, Feng Zikai, and Hongyi (who provided the calligraphy) meant to convey the Buddhist idea of equality of all sentient beings; the belief in non-duality and impermanence of all

[30] See Kao (2007) and Lin (2011) for more details. Many of the *fangsheng* anecdotes from the Ming-early Qing that Handlin-Smith 1999 relates are found in Feng Zikai's *Paintings on Protecting Life*.
[31] Feng Zikai's ideas about empathy included not only Buddhist influence but also Daoist, Confucian, Chinese traditional aesthetics, and German theories of aesthetics. See Barmé (2002: 184–190).
[32] Selections translated into English by article's author.

Figure 3: Pingdeng, Equality
I am made of flesh, and sentient beings are made of flesh
The names for sentient beings are different, but we are similarly constituted
Originally, all of the same nature
Just that the outer forms display a different appearance.

> things, especially that a being's mental and physical components are always in flux due to the workings of dependent origination; and that perhaps the man had a past life as a dog or vice versa.

But, the phrase by Turgenev that Feng Zikai included, "They are the eyes of equals," implies more resonance with the Buddhist idea of equality than was the actual case. The entire poem is:

> Us two in the room; my dog and me.... Outside a fearful storm is howling.
> The dog sits in front of me, and looks me straight in the face. And I, too, look into his face.
> He wants, it seems, to tell me something. He is dumb, he is without words, he does not understand himself – but I understand him.
> I understand that at this instant there is living in him and in me the same feeling, that there is no difference between us. We are the same; in each of us there burns and shines the same trembling spark.
> Death sweeps down, with a wave of its chill broad wing. . . .
> And the end!
> Who then can discern what was the spark that glowed in each of us?
> No! We are not beast and man that glance at one another....
> They are the eyes of equals, those eyes riveted on one another.
> And in each of these, in the beast and in the man, the same life huddles up in fear close to the other.
> (Project Gutenberg 2005).

Ivan S. Turgenev (1818–1883), a major figure of Russian realism, was not a Buddhist but an agnostic and a keen hunter, whose first work was *Sketches from a Hunter's Album* (1852). Turgenev's poetry and prose often featured dogs and explored the special human-dog relationship. His works, including *Fathers and Children* (1862), greatly influenced modern Chinese literature. Feng Zikai, in his later life, studied Russian and translated some Russian literature into Chinese, including *Sketches from a Hunter's Album* (1955); however, since *Paintings on Protecting Life* Volume One was published in 1929, Feng most likely read the above English translation of "The Dog" (1878) by Constance Garnett (1861–1946).[33] The "equality" Turgenev refers to between the man and dog is the spark of life and a shared fate: death.

As a hunter, Turgenev killed animals and did not profess a belief in the equality of all sentient beings. At most, in his works overall, "Turgenev shows human-animal interconnectedness, where animals are treated as both the victims of humans and their co-sufferers" (Kadyrbekova 2018: 24–25). In her comparative analysis of how Turgenev, Dostoevskii, Tolstoy, and Chekhov viewed animals, Zora Kadyrbekova asserted that:

> All four authors were acutely aware of the ruptured relationship between humans and nature in general, and animals in particular. All four held humans responsible for the destruction of nature and animal suffering. And feeling a profound kinship with the non-human beings, all four authors longed for a restored harmony between human and non-human worlds. Even Turgenev, despite his feeling that the alienation between humans and Nature is insurmountable, shows the affinity with and continuity of humans and animals (Kadyrbekova 2018: 236–237).

Even if his comparative use of Turgenev is stretched, Feng Zikai shows in this work his cosmopolitan knowledge of world literature and his concern with the *problématique* of empathy among living creatures.

Figure 4: Xiuluo, Asura
For thousands of years, in the food-bowl,
The resentment of the killed animals is as deep as the ocean
If you want to understand the catastrophes of war and killing in the world
Just listen to the sounds of the slaughterhouse at midnight.

Figure 4 features the famous Chinese poem "Asura" by Chan Master Yuanyuan of the Song Dynasty about the vicious karmic cycle of people killing animals, people killing people, being reborn as animals and then being killed again; illustration by Feng Zikai with calligraphy by Hongyi (Feng 1987: Volume One, 41–42). Humans consumed with pride, jealousy, and who tend towards fighting and violence, might be reborn in the Asura Realm.

The theme of animals' "karmic resentment" merits some explanation. China had a belief in "avenging spirits" even before the arrival of Buddhism. Roel Sterckx explains that "boundaries between the species in early China were not fixed. Instead, they were formulated according to various typologies of change" (Sterckx 2002: 171). One typology he terms "demonic metamorphosis. These are cases in which a transformation of some kind occurs as a result of a numinous sanction by an anonymous power (for instance, Heaven). Alternatively the human-to-animal or animal-to-human change is occasioned by a specific demonic agent such as a malign

[33] The first work Feng ever translated into Chinese was Constance Garnett's English translation of Turgenev's novella *First Love* (1860). Feng and Yin (1985: 207–211, 544).

spirit, a disease, or an attack by wild animals" (Sterckx 2002: 171). So, for example, someone responsible for unjust deaths was transformed into one or another kind of animal, or, someone who was killed unjustly was transformed into a dog and then "bit back" their killer. The "avenging ghost story" become a popular literary genre in the third to sixth centuries CE, by that time infused with Buddhist concepts of karma and reincarnation (Sterckx 2002: 172). As will be explained later in this article, animals' "karmic resentment" figures prominently in Cheng Yen's "The Great Lesson of our Times."

Figure 5: There is sentience in the chunks of flesh and blood
"If there is sound, it is alive; if silent, it is dead!"
Please do not lightly decide what is "alive" or "dead,"
As for the "silent," you should transform your hidden anguish into compassion
Please open your eyes when you use your chopsticks
There is sentience in the chunks of flesh and blood.

Figure 5 is a poem to awaken readers to the vicious cycle of killing and meat-eating by appealing to their empathy and powers of insight. Poem by Song Shouyi 宋守一, Ming 明 Dynasty, illustration by Feng Zikai with calligraphy by Zhu Youlan 朱幼蘭 (Feng 1987: Volume Four, 135–136).

Figure 6: Chanhui, Repentance
"Humans are not saints, no one is blameless"
Like a white garment that has dust on it,
To transform and become new, like brushing off the dust of the garment
If all have compassion in their hearts, benevolence and peace will fill the world.

Repentance, the subject of figure 6, is a key practice in Chinese Buddhism, as explained elsewhere in this article, and is a recurrent theme in the works of both Feng Zikai and Cheng Yen. Illustration by Feng Zikai, poem and calligraphy by Hongyi (Feng 1987, Volume One, 91–92).

Cheng Yen's "A Reminder Every Day"

Neither the traditional "tales of the miraculous" *zhiguai xiaoshu*, about karmic reciprocity between humans and animals (Zhang 2014: 97, 99), nor the classical Buddhist poems found in Feng's *Paintings on Protecting Life* appear in the text of "A Reminder Each Day, the content of which is solely Cheng Yen's speeches.

However, "A Reminder Every Day," as did Feng Zikai's *Paintings on Protecting Life*, illustrated the two main "strains" in Buddhist *husheng* discourse: karmic retribution, and empathy with animals due to our shared Buddha-nature (See Lee 2008 on these two strains). "A Reminder Each Day" features images of people and other sentient beings living together in love and harmony, and often includes exhortations to perform good deeds, especially to eat a vegetarian diet.

"A Reminder Every Day" was broadcast across the world in the afternoon by Tzu Chi nuns from March 3 to September 30, 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Before each lesson, there was a prayer that all people be safe during the pandemic, and the nuns called on people to "raise their heads to Heaven and repent, lower their heads and show gratitude to the earth" (Shih Cheng Yen 2021b: Preface). The collection of teachings and illustrations in "A Reminder Every Day" primarily focused on how Tzu Chi responded to the pandemic worldwide and shows Tzu Chi nuns, Pure Practitioners, and laypeople working together in the Four Missions of Medicine, Charity, Culture, and Education, including their assistance to refugees in many countries. The next section of this article will discuss some selections from "A Reminder Every Day" that focus on "The Great Lesson of our Times."

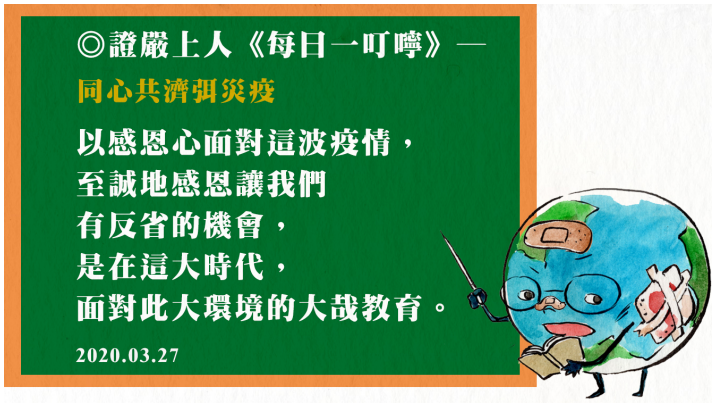

Figure 7: The Great Lesson of our Times
With a grateful heart, we face this pandemic,
Sincerely, be grateful that we have a chance to reflect,
It is in this Great Age,
We face "The Great Lesson" in this global environment.[34]

Figures 7, 8, and 9 specifically mention "The Great Lesson of Our Times" in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. Figures 10, 11, and 12 from "A Reminder Every Day" illustrate general Buddhist themes such as the importance of reflection and repentance and the prohibition against killing to avoid vicious karmic cycles of suffering and rebirth.

[34] This and other selections translated by article's author.
[35] "The four mahā-bhūta, which all physical substances are composed of." *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism*: 四大.

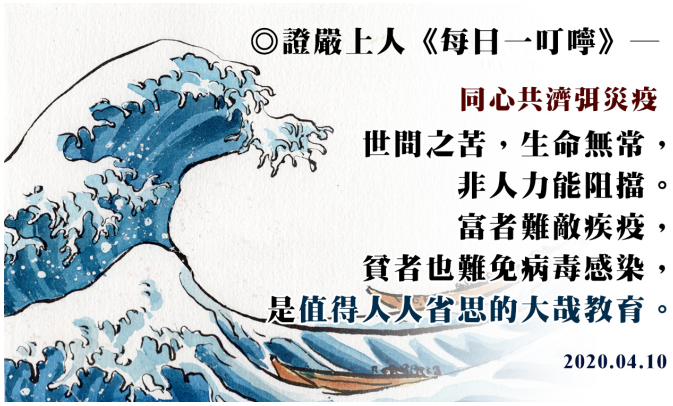

Figure 8: The Great Lesson of our Times, à la Hokusai
The suffering of the world and the impermanence of life cannot be stopped by human beings.
It is difficult for the rich to fight against epidemics, and it is hard for the poor to avoid viral infections.
This is the "Great Lesson of our Times" worthy of reflection by all people.

Figure 9: Accept the Lessons of the Pandemic
Accept the lessons of the pandemic:
First, we must pray for the end of this disaster,
Increase good affinities
Give thanks, respect others, love others
And tame one's own ignorant desires.

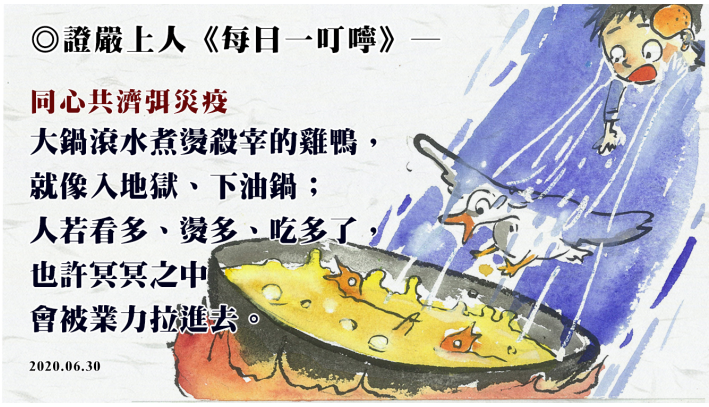

Figure 10: Pulled in by negative karma
Slaughtered chickens and ducks boiling in a large pot of boiling water
Is like going to hell and boiling in a vat of oil
If people see this too much, boil too much, or eat this too much,
Imperceptibly but inexorably
They will be pulled in by negative karma.

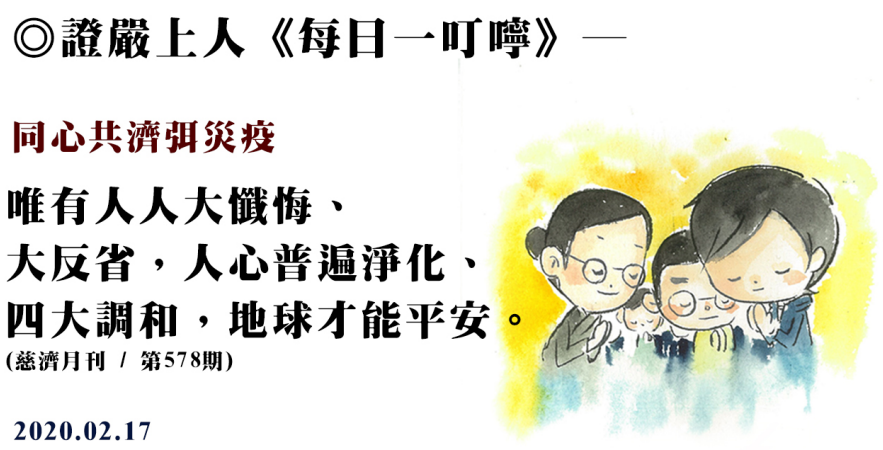

Figure 11: Repent and purify your heart
Only when everyone repents
A great reckoning, hearts are commonly purified around the world
Then the four elements [earth, water, fire, air][35] will be in harmony,
the world will be at peace.

Figure 12: Be pious
The virus transmission is invisible
It can't be stopped by humans
The only way is to be pious in your attitude to life.

Major differences between Feng Zikai's work and "A Reminder Every Day" are the latter's insistence on vegetarianism; the mention of *mofa*; and linking global disasters with notions of collective karma that Feng did not do. As seen in figure 12, on the right, within a bubble protecting against the coronavirus are the words protection of life, *husheng*; vegetarianism *sushi*; and pray, *qidao*.

Figure 13: Only vegetarianism can change fate of humanity
Vegetarianism provides health for everyone, reduces disease, and cultivates compassion,
Only vegetarianism can change the fate of humanity.

In figure 13, notice that the vegetables wear white lab coats, cloaked in the authority of "Science" to corroborate vegetarianism's health benefits. Feng Zikai's collection does not include this aspect.

Moreover, unlike Feng Zikai, Cheng Yen links vegetarianism and environmental protection because Cheng's Yen's promotion of vegetarianism takes place in the context of post-Industrial Revolution's global ecological crises. Cheng Yen has a global awareness and expresses her empathy with the suffering of the entire earth as seen in figures 14 and 15.

Figure 14: Environmental protection starts from the heart
Environmental protection starts from the heart,
keep food, clothing, housing and transportation simple;
Being vegetarian can protect your body and mind,
the land, and the earth.

Mofa, Age of the End of the Dharma

Unlike in Feng Zikai's collection, but much like *shanshu* tracts produced in the turmoil of nineteenth-century China, notions of collective karma, *gongye*, and *mofa* pervade "The Great Lesson of our Times" and are illustrated

Figure 15: Keep the precept of vegetarianism
In that year of the September 21 earthquake, I saw the terrible toll of the disaster,
People were hurt and it caused me pain, "I was sad to the point of silence";
Today the pandemic spreads, "I am worried to the point of silence,"
I hope that everyone keeps the precept of vegetarianism, has a sincere heart and is mindful.

in "A Reminder Every Day."Collective karma and *mofa* were fundamental notions in not only traditional *shanshu* but also for "modern" Buddhists such as Taixu:

> Now we are in the Age of the Final Dharma and disasters such as epidemics, wars, and famines are common. Is it really the case that the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas do not have the supernatural powers and skillful means to save the people? Actually, these disasters are mostly caused by the karma incurred by all living beings, which is endless and pervasive and the deepest obstruction. We also ask each person to face this sincerely, repent with all your heart, make great vows, stay away from evil and never commit evil again. Then you will know that Prajñāpāramitā can eliminate all suffering and it is true, not false. (Taixu 1919, CBETA 2025.R2, TX11, no. 7, pp. 908a11–909a2)

In October 1939, as many provinces fell to the Japanese Army, Taixu consoled the Chinese in their suffering with particular concern for the Buddhists and reiterated his belief that only Buddhism can save the world. He again referred to "collective karma," 國人共業 *guoren gongye*: "However, due to the collective karma of [Buddhists'] countrymen and the accumulated evil of the invaders, they [the Buddhists] are all suffering from the burning flames of demons and the torment of the earth by evil spirits" (Taixu 1939).

Some explanation of collective karma is apt here. In Buddhist cosmology, time horizons are vast; they are calculated in *kalpas*, in million-year spans. As James. B. Apple quotes from Jan Nattier, "Buddhist scriptures regularly describe an unending and beginningless cycle of repeated birth and re-death applicable to the universe as well as to sentient beings ... samsara" (Apple 2010: 109). Apple adds: "Zwi Werblowsky [2005] terms cultural formations that do not have in their worldview"an ultimate consummation of history" as "relative eschatologies," since they understand time as a beginningless flow of repetitive cycles" (Apple 2010: 110).

However, early South Asian Buddhists detailed a cosmology that went far beyond simply consisting of endless cycles, but also explained how the laws of the natural world and the laws of human socio-political culture were inseparable. The universe is shaped not by divine forces but by karmic forces generated through the acts of humans (Apple 2010: 111). Apple relates Stanley Tambiah's explanation: "[t]he collective actions of all living beings produces the world as a whole resulting in a stratified world system that is constituted by upper levels of refined spirituality down to levels of course materiality" (Tambiah 1976: 38). So for Buddhist cultures, "it is the acts (*karma*) of sentient beings that shape society and the environment through the law of dependent

origination. The Buddhist understanding of *dharma* as cosmic law therefore shapes human society through interrelations with karmic counteractive measures and processes" (Apple 2010: 111).[36]

Around the sixth century CE, Chinese Buddhists developed a three-fold scheme of true dharma, 正法 *zhengfa* (when Buddha was on the earth and when his students and others after them upheld the correct dharma), semblance dharma, 像法 *xiangfa* (when a semblance of Buddhism was practiced), and final dharma, *mofa* (the dharma in decline when not only dharma is forgotten but unrest, wars, and floods and famines and other disasters multiply due to degenerative and immoral acts by humans ignorant of dharma). Chinese Buddhists believe the final dharma age began around the sixth century CE and continued to the present. East Asian Buddhists developed many ways "how to practice Buddhism within such decadent cosmological circumstances" (Apple 2010: 118), whether to focus on monastic discipline, recite sutras, focus on Maitreya, create new scriptures, or print and distribute *shanshu*.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, Cheng Yen had often warned of increasing disasters worldwide related to *mofa* (Shih Cheng Yen 2013a). She explained to her followers that because the Dharma is not well practiced in the world, greed, anger, envy, and other turbidities accumulate, and due to dependent origination, disasters increase (Jing Si Abode English Editing Team 2019).

> The Buddha taught all sentient beings to follow the Bodhisattva Path, because there is so much suffering in the world, and in the Age of Final Dharma, natural and human-made disasters are non-stop. At present, human-made destruction and pollution has led to more climate imbalances and more and more disasters. In addition to the disasters of the "four major imbalances" [earth water fire wind], there are also the calamities caused by war" (Shih Cheng Yen 2022: 8).

Figure 16: In the Age of the Final Dharma
In the "Age of the Final Dharma," how not to make the "Five Turbidities"[37] increase?
The only way is to engender "goodness," for the heart to think good thoughts,
The mouth to speak good words, the body to do good things,
With an unselfish heart of Great Love,
To do things that benefit sentient beings.

[36] The recent work of Adeana McNicholl shows that not only did "Buddhist cosmology" evolve over several centuries, but argues that *preta* literature (South Asian narratives from the last few centuries BCE to circa sixth century CE about spiritual beings akin to ghosts) played an important role in the "maturation" of Buddhist cosmology and ethics (17). Her thesis is an antidote to over-emphasis on "the human realm" and reminds us of the "continued importance of non-human beings for Buddhist ethical thought" (McNicholl 2024: 23).

[37] "The five turbidities are the five kinds of degeneracy in a decreasing kalpa. They begin when human lifespan has decreased from 80,000 years to 20,000 years, and become more severe as human lifespan decreases to 10 years. They are (1) the turbidity of a kalpa in decay, which is characterized by the next four turbidities; (2) the turbidity of views, such as the five wrong views; (3) the turbidity of afflictions, including greed, anger, delusion, arrogance, and doubt; (4) the turbidity of sentient beings that live a wicked life and are in increasing suffering; (5) the turbidity of human lifespan as it decreases to 10 years. The wrong views in (2) and the afflictions in (3) are turbidity itself, which leads to the results in (4) and (5)." Buddha Sūtras Mantras Sanskrit, 2009–2024.

In figure 16, at the right side of the frame, the poster has three phrases: "vegetables diet, environmental protection, save the earth!" In this case, the term used for vegetarianism is not "*su*" or "*zhai*," but the more public-friendly "*shushi*, which translates to"vegetables diet." The illustrator adds a smiling earth and a cute dog, perhaps to offset the seriousness of *mofa*.

However, some examples from "A Reminder Every Day" portray the seriousness of the message, such as figure 17, which illustrates the link between collective karma and disasters.

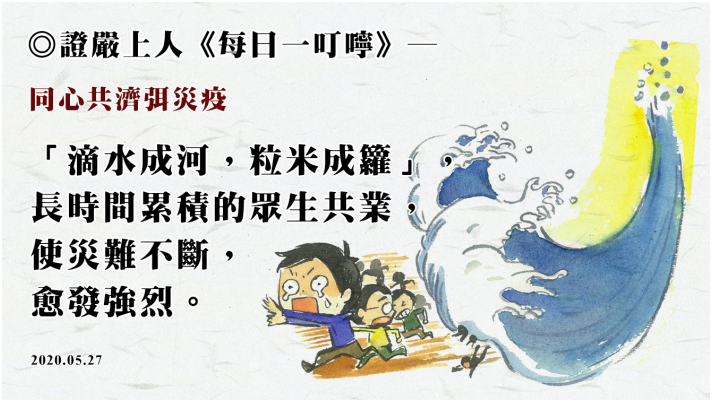

Figure 17: Collective karma accumulates and causes disasters
A drop of water turns into a river, a grain of rice turns into a basket
The collective karma of all sentient beings accumulates over a long period of time
Makes disasters continuously happen and become more intense.

Figures 18 and 19 illustrate how the resentment and grievances[38] of animals who were eaten is related to cycles of violence in the world, like the "Asura" poem discussed earlier in the article.

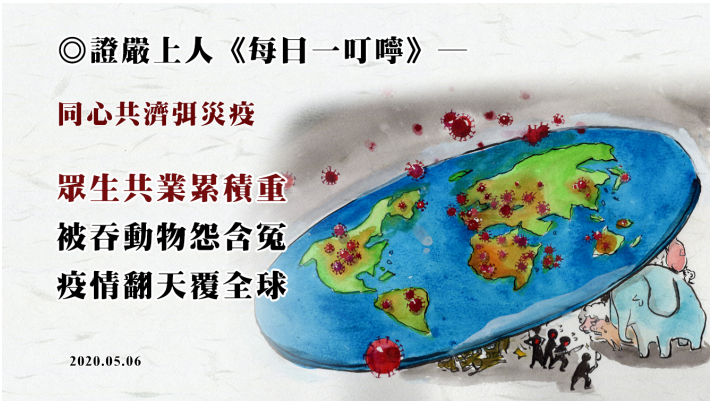

Figure 18: Collective karma is heavy
The collective karma accumulated by sentient beings is heavy
The animals who are eaten are resentful and harbor grievances
The pandemic has turned the world upside down.

About animals and karma, Cheng Yen commented: "Animals suffer so much that they can't express their suffering, and they can't express their resentment, so they vent their hatred"(Shih Cheng Yen 1990b). In that

[38] Ritzinger (2020: 215–217) discusses the Chinese term for grievances, 冤 (seen in figure 18 and figure 19) in relation to narratives of karmic debt 冤親債 (and how resolved through repentance, merit-making and appeal to Buddhas and bodhisattvas) that he recorded at a lay Buddhist group in Taiwan. The narratives he discusses involve karmic debt among people (or ghosts) across several lifetimes, rather than human-animal karmic relationships, as in the present article. However he notes that "[t]he idea that interpersonal relationships are bound up with karma is a commonplace. While not all Taiwanese believe in it, all are familiar with the general concept" (217).

Figure 19: Angry animals counter-attack the human realm
A life that's not happy without eating meat
Will make animals angry more and more
Until they howl about this injustice
And counter-attack the human realm with their spiritual resentment.

lecture, she referred to a lesson from the *Medicine Buddha Sutra* 藥師經 to talk about suffering, ill deeds, and karmic rebirth, and the necessity to cultivate compassion and wisdom:

> Moreover, Manjushri, there are sentient beings who are avaricious, envious, jealous, and accustomed to praising themselves and disparaging others. They are bound to sink onto the three Evil Paths, suffering intense misery for countless thousands of years. When this extreme suffering comes to an end, they will be reborn in the human world as an oxen, horses, donkey or camels. Often being beaten and mistreated, they will suffer hunger and thirst and constantly travel along the road carrying heavy loads (Shih, Thanh, and Leigh 2001:27).

What sets apart Cheng Yen from the other Buddhist leaders and communities discussed at the start of this article is her explanation for the causes of the pandemic. She points to the SARS-CoV-2 virus and human greed (desire for meat; consumerism's effect on the environment, etc.) but also believes, as did Taixu and many Buddhists before him in Chinese history, that the resentment and grievances of butchered animals are linked with disasters and wars (see above). As did Taixu in 1935, Cheng Yen discusses this animal resentment in terms of *qi* and its relationship to collective karma. "The poisonous *qi* [vapor] that humans spit out also comes from humans eating the meat of all sentient beings to their heart's content!" (Shih Cheng Yen 2021a: 171). In another passage, Cheng Yen writes about the invisible virus that caused the global pandemic, and has shrouded the whole world in *bingqi* 病氣 a *qi* [vapor] of sickness: "from the Buddhist point of view, this invisible *qi* is the result of karma, because over a long time, sentient beings have accumulated collective karma, it's difficult to escape" (Shih Cheng Yen 2021a: 15). The relationship among butchered animals and their resentment, *qi*, and collective karma have a history as old as Chinese Buddhism itself and requires separate study. However, some key points include the following: *Qi* is a fundamental concept in classical Chinese cosmology and medicine (predating Buddhism's entry into China) with many meanings according to context including breath, substance of the body, temperament or mood, life-energy of the body, substance of the entire material world, and the mover of "history" through eternal cycles (Goldin 2020: 229–239).

Once Buddhist texts entered China, blending Indic and Chinese concepts resulted in the following examples. First, with reference to a Buddhist text from the first half of the third century BCE in China, Eric M. Greene writes:

> Reference to meat-eating occurs in the long passage from the middle of the text in which the Buddha explains four ways of obtaining merit after the Buddha has died. If, the Buddha says, a country is plagued by bandits, natural disasters, or the spread of disease-causing "noxious *qi* 毒氣," this is the doing of the dragons and spirits living in the ocean. These creatures are the reborn spirits of animals who have died at the hands of hunters, butchers, and fishermen. Angry on account of their unjust deaths, they spread illness among the human realm, and "with the inhumane slaughter of animal lives, mutual enmity [between the dragons and humans] continues 不仁殘殺物命, 展轉相怨."[39] Those who themselves kill animals will be immediately poisoned and killed. But those who merely enjoy the fruits of these killers by eating the meat of animals will also contract either contagious or non-contagious illnesses. The final message is then made clear: "Intelligent men therefore realize that killing is a sin, and so enjoin others not to kill . . . even if the killers [of animals simply] give you meat, be sure not to eat it. If you do not eat it, then even if you live in an evil age, amongst bandits, natural disasters, and noxious *qi*, you will not be contaminated." (Greene 2016: 17–18)

Second, the *Continued Lives of Eminent Monks Xu Gaoseng chuan* 續高僧傳 (seventh century CE) has a "description of the"epidemic vapors" (*yiqi* 疫氣) [that] recalls both the Abhidharmic notion of nonhuman beings spitting poisonous vapors during the end times and indigenous Chinese beliefs that equate epidemics with noxious pneumas(*qi* 氣) spread by vengeful spirits" (Capitanio 2021: 182). Capitanio continues:

> The belief that illnesses and epidemics were caused by demonic beings was widespread long before Buddhism was introduced to China. Such supernatural depredations were also regarded as retribution for unethical behavior, and, particularly in Daoist communities, confession, repentance, as well as the use of incantations, talismans, and other ritual devices were recommended as treatment (Capitanio 2021: 186).

This cultural context facilitated the adoption by Chinese Buddhists of methods to purify karma through incantations, such as the *Great Compassion Dhāraṇī* and the *Eleven-Faced Avalokiteśvara* (Capitanio 2021: 186).

It is striking to also compare what Cheng Yen writes about *duqi* 毒氣, poisonous vapor, and *bingqi* [a vapor of sickness] with what Vincent Goossaert has discovered about eschatological spirit-writings of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries related to the cults of Lü Dongbin, also known as Lüzu, 呂祖, and Doumu 斗母, Mother of the Nine Emperors.[40] About Doumu's text:

> Doumu develops a naturalistic theory whereby people who kill animals cause the world's qi to become imbalanced, attract disasters, and are eventually reborn as animals themselves. According to this concept, black qi (heiqi 黑氣) or killing qi (shaqi 殺氣), which emanates from humans killing animals or doing other bad deeds, accumulates through time and eventually clogs up the universe. This theory is also found in other texts from this period, as we have seen in the Lüzu tract (Goossaert 2018: 188).

But how new was "Doumu's" theory? How sectarians and Buddhist monastics in different historical periods interpreted centuries-old ideas about connections between butchered animals, *qi* [vapors], and karma requires much more research.[41] Collective karma looms large in Cheng Yen's "Great Lesson of our Times," and it would be

[39] Lambert Schmithausen traced strands of ecological ethical thought in early Indic Buddhism and suggests that "[n]on-injury (*ahiṁsā*) appears to have started, in the Brāhmaṇa period, as a way of protecting oneself from the vengeance of injured animals (and plants) in the yonder world, and probably also from the vengeance of their congeners in this very life" (Schmithausen 1997: 15).

[40] Both of these cults exist today in various forms in Taiwan.

[41] Jessica Zu writes with regards to canonical sources: "The debate of karma as either individual or collective is not a modern phenomenon. It seems to have developed in stages, of which the contemporary debate is only a ripple." She traces this debate at least from the first and second centuries CE (Zu 2023a: 90).

valuable to know the precise sources for her language about revengeful animals and the poisonous *qi* produced by humans and their harmful actions.

In contrast, Feng Zikai's *Paintings on Protecting Life* did not refer to *qi* or collective karma or depict the larger context of war and disorder of his times. Yet in fact, as Yan 2023 has found, "karma was articulated ... by wartime Chinese Buddhists as a means of Nationalist mobilization for China's war effort" (Yan 2023: 95). Jessica Zu (2023b) argues that among Master Yinguang's innovations in promoting Pure Land Buddhism, he empowered: "common practitioners to see themselves as active agents of social transformation who can save the world from impending calamities through their daily pious acts" (Zu 2023b: 80).[42] Yinguang's message reformulated "traditional notions of collective inherited karmic guilt and the practice of transferring merit to a much broader social imagination in which Chinese people are bound together by their horizontally shared karma ... and in doing so, essentially redefines the Chinese nation as a karmic society" (Zu 2023b: 80). Feng Zikai took a different approach: when the Japanese embarked on their full invasion of China, initially Feng was criticized in the press for his "pacifism," that is, his promotion of compassion, protection of life, and the importance of art. Feng believed what is crucial for humanity's long-term well-being is "peace, happiness, and universal love, and the basic ingredient for"preserving life" itself: art" (Barmé 2002:190).[43]

Another difference between mid-century Chinese Buddhists and Buddhists in the twenty-first century is that the latter did not experience the same type of "global" or environmental crises,[44] particularly a global pandemic. While during World War II many Chinese Buddhists' focus was "the nation," Cheng Yen embraces a global view in her teachings. Feng Zikai focused on improving the behavior of the individual or at most, family and friends, rather than urge people in China or around the world to undertake collective action to reverse the course of world destruction. Feng's main message in *Paintings on Protecting Life* was this: "by protecting life one would establish a sympathy with all living beings and presumably come to appreciate the complex weave of the fabric of the world" (Barmé 2002: 184).

There are also differing attitudes towards practicing vegetarianism. Cheng Yen's message about "The Great Lesson of our Times" is a warning that fits the "Final Dharma" age. Cheng Yen not only urges people not to kill and not to have anyone kill for you (First Buddhist Precept), but in the strongest possible terms, she urges all to be vegetarian, unlike Feng Zikai. Feng was vegetarian but did not actively urge others to be one (Barmé 2002: 185) though his master Hongyi, a monk and strict Vinaya master, admonished his students to give up meat and to tell one's family members not to kill any sentient being (Barmé 2002: 182).

Cheng Yen harmonizes discourses of science and technology with Buddhism

In addition to the widespread global environmental crises of recent years, a great difference between the times of Feng Zikai and that of Cheng Yen is the degree to which science and technology have progressed. Cheng Yen has developed a worldview that combines classic Buddhist discourse with science. Science (especially medicine) and technology play very important roles in the Tzu Chi enterprise.[45] In fact, Tzu Chi's Mission of Education evolved out of the need to train medical specialists (nurses, doctors, and other specialists) for Tzu Chi Hospitals and clinics. Each week, scientists and medical specialists in the Tzu Chi organization inform Cheng Yen of the

[42] "Yinguang explained that nationwide calamities were retribution for the masses' shared karma ... and if everyone could *nianfo* [recite the name of Amitābha] and do good deeds, then the shared karma could be transformed and the calamities could be extinguished;" being a vegetarian also could protect the Chinese people (Zu 2023b: 90).

[43] However as the war continued, Feng Zikai produced other art and writings that criticized the Japanese military's brutalities and called on all Chinese to unite and resist. (Hung 1994: 136–150).

[44] See Fisher (2023) for a study of the notion of "universal karma" among volunteers at a Buddhist temple in contemporary China inspired by both environmental awareness and their charitable works.

[45] Of course, other modern Buddhist groups have embraced science and technology in various ways but not to the degree as Tzu Chi. See Nicolaisen 2019: 303–306 for an overview of how Dharma Drum Mountain blends Buddhist discourses with those of modern science and technology to solve ecological problems.

latest scientific developments within and outside the organization. And, in 2021, Cheng Yen was elected to the United States National Academy of Inventors because "Tzu Chi is leading research and development of herbal medicine around the world, and for its 'multiple achievements in the fields of medicine, medicine, and technology-related research and development, resulting in outstanding contributions and great influence' " (Qian 2022).

Since the early twentieth century, one of the major ways Buddhists have endeavored to prove the relevance of Buddhism to the modern world has been to argue that "Buddhism is compatible with science" (Hammerstrom 2015). Cheng Yen said:

> For example, the Buddhist scriptures say that besides our world, there are three thousand great worlds in the universe; it also says that "the earth has no bottom and the sky has no top,"which means that the earth is floating in the air. These theories originated more than 2,000 years ago, and are consistent with current scientific research results. It can be seen that the Buddha has transcendent wisdom, and Buddhism is a fairly scientific religion (Shih Cheng Yen 2013b).

And:

> Seeing the predictions of scientists, it is said that climate change will become more and more extreme, and droughts will become more and more serious.... I have to think of the wisdom of the Buddha. He predicted the future evil world of five turbidities, the "three major kalpas" and the "three smaller calamities." A kalpa is a long period of time, slowly accumulating, causing natural disasters to occur frequently. This is called "three major kalpas, and there will be three very long periods.... Famine, plague, and war are the minor kalpas: The Buddha's prophecies have appeared one by one in the current world. Faced with such warning signs, how should human beings respond? Human beings must quickly wake up and do some soul-searching! (Shih Cheng Yen 2016).

To Cheng Yen, Buddhism is not only "compatible with" science, but she states that scientific discoveries prove Buddhist truths:

> In addition to weather forecasting, scientists around the world are also working hard to develop earthquake prediction systems and apply seismic shock wave detection technology, hoping to give early warning to the public. [Cheng Yen] praised these scientific methods that not only improve people's lives, but also confirm the scientific nature of Buddhism. In fact, Buddhist scriptures talk of six kinds of vibrations. The sky shakes and the earth shakes.... With the advancement of science, more and more of the Buddha's teachings more than 2,500 years ago have been verified to be true principles rather than mystical talk (Shih Cheng Yen 2017).

But the hermeneutical horizon of science has its limits:

> Actually, scientists can only explore what it is, and they haven't explored why it is. What is it before it happens? In fact, all the dharmas of the three times, all created by ideals, are all one thought. Where does the source of the dharma come from? Modern science has proved more and more that the Buddha's scientific view is really pure in principle, and so is the human body (Shih Cheng Yen 2017).[46]

Cheng Yen warns that if the achievements of science are not backed by a sincere love for all things and a noble sentiment of respecting life, not only will it not be able to guarantee the safety of life, but it will even become a time when science is more advanced and destroys the world (Shih Cheng Yen 1990b).

[46] Compare similarly with Taixu in 1923, who admired the scientific method and believed that scientific knowledge can be proofs for Buddhism, yet held that science cannot bring humans to enlightenment. Shi Taixu (1980: 807).

Hope in the Age of *Mofa*

In a Manichean fashion, Cheng Yen compares the present world's tribulations to a tug-of-war, a struggle between Good and Evil:

Figure 20: Tug-of-war between Good and Evil
In the tug-of-war between Good and Evil, if one more person stands on the Good Side,
That's one more bit of power for Good.

Unlike late Qing Dynasty millenarians, for whom the end of the world was nigh, Cheng Yen is hopeful amidst the precarity of our times. First, Cheng Yen in her teachings repeatedly calls for individuals as Bodhisattvas to come together (凝聚 agglomerate) into groups, into a larger dharma-body. She stresses collective power to effect positive change. Tzu Chi is both an NGO and a Buddhist social movement:

Figure 21: Great Love quells disasters
Awaken a pious heart and agglomerate the effects of love,
Not only yourself, but also spur on your relatives and friends;
Liberate yourself from being tied up by oral desires,
Great love quells disasters.

Second, Cheng Yen promotes the use of science and technology for good, whether to invent vaccines or spread the Dharma. "Today's technology helps me to speak about the Dharma. Although we are talking about the Age of Final Dharma, at this time we should quickly use the current technology to spread the law to grasp the causes and conditions, to avert the end of the Dharma *qiangjiu mofa* 搶救末法 and bring back the True Dharma. It's expected that from now on, everyone's Buddha nature will always be activated" (Shih Cheng Yen 2023). Cheng Yen encourages her disciples to use the Internet as a tool to spread the Dharma. Through the Internet, one can obtain information quickly, just like the "Sky Eye" mentioned in the *Abhidharma* (Tzu Chi Da Ai Video 2019). She calls "The Cloud" a *Bodhimaṇḍa* (seat of awakening) that was especially important during

the COVID-19 pandemic to link people separated by lockdowns and quarantines: to transmit information, to continue education, and to preserve community.

Figure 22: The Cloud is a Bodhimaṇḍa
Go to The Cloud for video capability
The Internet covers the globe,
The Cloud is a *Bodhimaṇḍa*,
All hearts are inter-connected.

A good illustration of "collective Bodhisattva power" was the Tzu Chi-organized Buddha Bathing Day in Taipei on May 14, 2023. Around ten thousand people participated, including four hundred Buddhist monks and nuns from thirty-four different monasteries (Shih Cheng Yen 2023). Cheng Yen commented:

> There was a Buddha more than 2,000 years ago, and after more than 2,000 years, all the Buddhas of the ten directions will begin to emerge, just like … [on May 14] the Buddha statues "welled forth from the earth," and there were nearly ten thousand people in the audience. At that time, everyone's Buddha-nature also appeared together, so that it all can be neat and orderly.... All of us meeting together: Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are in the world (Shih Cheng Yen 2023).[47]

Most importantly, the True Dharma resides in the heart:

> Drawing from the *Medicine Buddha Sutra*, [Cheng Yen] has said that although we are in the Age of the Final Dharma, "true Dharma" is to have a righteous mind and actions. She said that there are three stages of Buddhism—True Dharma, Semblance Dharma, and the Final Dharma. In fact, these stages do not exist in actual time, but in people's minds. "To be able to implement the Buddha's spiritual philosophy and teachings in daily life, to break down selfishness and ignorance, to sweep away afflictions, to be unbiased and unattached, this is the Dharma abiding in the heart; otherwise, even if you were alive at the time of the Buddha and could not accept the teachings on Dharma, it would be tantamount to being in the age of the Final Dharma. Some people may lament: Why am I so unlucky? I was born in the age of the Final Dharma so far away from the True Dharma era? But on the other hand, in fact, the True Dharma abides in the human world. If we approach the Buddha's teachings with 'Right Wisdom,' our hearts are in the era when the True Dharma is flourishing. Just like in the world of Tzu Chi, we can see living Bodhisattvas and people who can save people everywhere. Isn't this the most prosperous era of Dharma? This is 'the True Dharma abiding in the world" (Shih Cheng Yen 1990a).

[47] The *Lotus Sutra, Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮華經, is the doctrinal source for Bodhisattvas "welling forth from the earth." *Congdi yongchu pin*, 從地湧出品, Chapter 15. *The Lotus Sutra* is the work that Cheng Yen has spent the most time lecturing upon: 1969–1971; 1975–1988; 2009 to present. Her 2016: 101. It will take scholars outside the Tzu Chi organization to compare Cheng Yen's interpretation and application of "Bodhisattvas welling forth from the earth in the Age of Final Dharma" with, for example, the 地涌の菩薩 in the teachings of Nichiren and the Soka Gakkai; see Kanno (2011) on Nichiren and the Soka Gakkai.

Conclusion

This study of "The Great Lesson of our Times," vegetarianism, and the illustrated teachings in "A Reminder Every Day" points to a number of future directions for research. First, to look at Tzu Chi's promotion of vegetarianism and food ethics in a global comparative perspective.[48] Second, in addition to comparing Buddhist responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, there should be more work on inter-religious comparisons on the origin and meaning of the pandemic (Pieterse and Landman 2021) including comparative eschatology.[49]

The world has greatly changed since the time of Taixu and Feng Zikai; "modern Chinese Buddhism" is pluralistic and ever-evolving. But the aim of this article is to push beyond the boundaries of the "Buddhist modernism paradigm." Granted, the main orientation of "A Reminder Every Day," as part of "The Great Lesson of our Times," was human-focused, to broadcast the many ways that the Tzu Chi organization helped people worldwide during the pandemic. But "The Great Lesson" involved many beings and entities together: various types of *qi*; viruses; the animal realm; and avenging animal spirits. The vista is vast. Through time: not only centuries of Chinese and Indian history but also kalpas; and space, the microscopic (viruses) and the telescopic ("Heaven" and "the three thousand worlds") cyberspace, and beyond, "The Sky Eye." To gain a deeper understanding of the ritual practices and textual traditions of Buddhist groups and individuals today, scholars must transcend the limits of the "Buddhist modernist paradigm" and *renjian fojiao*, explore historical continuities, and engage with all the evidence, no matter the contradictions revealed that rattle "rational" sensibilities.

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[48] New research in this area was presented at the conference "Buddhist Foodways: Vegetarianism, Ritual Economies, and Gastropolitics," University of Venice Nov. 28–29, 2024, and at the "Buddhism and Food Ethics" conference, University of Oxford China Centre, April 20, 2024.

[49] For example, see Dein (2021). We should note that *Yin-Cheng Journal of Contemporary Buddhism* published a special issue on "Climate Change and the Dharma-Ending Age: The Ecological Crisis Through the Lens of Buddhist Eschatology" (Vol.1, No. 2) but the articles do not discuss vegetarianism or the pandemic. Though the Tzu Chi organization sponsors this journal, the issue did not mention Taiwan or Tzu Chi organization.

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