

Karma, Charisma, and Community: Karmic Storytelling in a Blue-Collar Taiwanese Buddhist Organization*

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Abstract

This ethnographic study investigates the Maitreya Lay Buddhist Lodge 慈氏居士林, a small working class Taiwanese lay organization inspired by the Humanistic Buddhism of Yinshun. Though small, the group is impressive for its strong sense of community and the comparative youth of its membership. What accounts for its success? Several factors are at play, but my paper identifies the group's karmic storytelling practices as one key element. This storytelling often takes the form of personal testimonials of lives transformed. The sources of woe may be profound or quotidian. The turning point of the story, however, is always the same: an encounter with the Dharma through the Lodge's lay preacher Brother Zhong. Zhong helps them to identify the true source of their woe in karmic debts and shows them how to resolve these debts through repentance, merit-making, and appeal to the saving power of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Such testimonials appear on the Lodge's website, are told frequently in conversation, and, importantly, are retold by Zhong, whose preaching relies heavily on karmic narratives. Based on ongoing fieldwork, I argue that these practices serve to validate the teller, integrate the community, and augment the charisma of its preacher.

Keywords:

Humanistic Buddhism, karma, narrative, Taiwan, lay Buddhism

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因果、魅力與群體 ——台灣藍領居士團體講因果故事方式的個案研究

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摘要

本論文以田野調查的方法，研究台灣一個小型藍領階層的人間佛教團體——八德慈氏居士林。此團體雖然不大，卻有強烈的群體感以及成員比較年輕的特色。其成就何處而來？因素不止一個，不過大概以其講因果故事的方式為最重要。這些故事通常是人生轉變的個人見證，困境也許極端，也許尋常，但是故事的轉折點都一樣——因親近居士林的講師鐘師兄而接觸佛法。在鐘氏的指導下，成員發現困境的根本原因是前世的冤親債主，並學習以懺悔、修福與祈求佛菩薩加持來還債，而得以解決問題。這些個人見證的故事會張貼在居士林的網站，成員常轉述，而且鐘氏在講經說法時常將這些故事用作說明因果運作的例子。基於實地的調查，本文認為這些敘述行為有三個作用：讓敘述者創立新的自我認同、促成群體的團結、營造鐘師兄作為講師的魅力。

關鍵詞：

人間佛教、因果、敘述、台灣、居士佛教

Introduction

Buddhism in Taiwan has enjoyed a florescence in recent decades. The rise of major, multinational organizations such as Dharma Drum Mountain (Fagu shan 法鼓山), Foguang shan 佛光山, and Tzu Chi (Ciji jijinhui 慈濟基金會), as well as smaller but similarly impressive groups such as the Incense Light Community (Xiangguang biqiuni sengtuan 香光比丘尼僧團), have spread the Dharma and raised the profile of the religion. Scholars writing in English have taken notice and monographs are accumulating at an accelerating rate.¹ However, with the exception of Esther-Maria Guggenmos' work on lay people,² attention has so far focused almost exclusively on these elite monastic or monastic-led organizations.

Yet they are only one part of the Buddhist landscape, and a smaller one than we might assume. In Taoyuan 桃園, a city of 2.5 million residents and the corner of Taiwan that will concern us here, there are 78 temples registered with the government as Buddhist.³ Only two of these temples are affiliated with one

¹ Chandler, *Establishing a Pure Land on Earth*; Huang, *Charisma and Compassion*; DeVido, *Taiwan's Buddhist Nuns*; Yao, *Taiwan's Tzu Chi as Engaged Buddhism*; Yü, *Passing the Light*; Madsen, *Democracy's Dharma*; Laliberté, *The Politics of Buddhist Organizations in Taiwan, 1989–2003*. Jones casts a wider net chronologically, but he too is focused on major monastic organizations and figures. Jones, *Buddhism in Taiwan*. Taiwanese scholarship, unsurprisingly, treats a broader range of movements and topics, but here, too, elite organizations and figures receive the lion's share of attention. See, for instance, the following general histories: Kan Zhengzong 闕正宗, *Taiwan fojiao yi bai nian 臺灣佛教一百年*; Jiang Canteng 江燦騰, *Taiwan dangdai fojiao 臺灣當代佛教*; Jiang Canteng 江燦騰, *Taiwan jindai fojiao biange yu fansi 臺灣近代佛教的變革與反思*; and Jiang Canteng 江燦騰, Hou Kunhong 侯坤宏, and Yang Shuhao 楊書濠, *Zhanhou taiwan hanchuan fojiao shi 戰後臺灣漢傳佛教史*. The last of these does have a valuable chapter on lay Buddhism, but it focuses on two prominent organizations, namely, Modern Chan (Xiandai chan 現代禪) and Weiman 維鬘. The former has been studied by Ji Zhe. Ji, "Expectation, Affection and Responsibility."

² Guggenmos, "I Believe in Buddhism and Traveling": *Denoting Oneself a Lay Buddhist in Contemporary Urban Taiwan*.

³ Zhonghua minguo neizheng bu 中華民國內政部, *Quanguo zongjiao zixun wang 全國宗教資訊網*. "Buddhist" here is a self-designation. What precisely "Buddhism" entails at each of these institutions would require ethnographic investigation. We can say that virtually all of them have Buddhist figures listed as their primary objects of devotion (*zhushi shenzhi* 主祀神祇), but the registry lumps

of the three major organizations mentioned above.⁴ They have an additional nine centers and branches which are not temples and thus are not registered, but no doubt other groups do as well. Thus, despite some uncertainty at the margins, we can estimate with some confidence that the “Big Three” actually make up less than 15% of Buddhist institutions in the municipality. Much of Taiwanese Buddhism as a lived religion takes place in these other, smaller temples and organizations that have escaped the attention of scholars. A fuller understanding of Buddhism in the country demands that they be included in the picture. Here, I would like to discuss one such group: the Maitreya Lay Buddhist Lodge (Cishi jushilin 慈氏居士林).

The Lodge lies on a narrow commercial lane in a poor area of the Bade 八德 district.⁵ Tucked above a failed vegetarian restaurant, it is a blue-collar lay Buddhist community devoted to Maitreya and inspired by the Humanistic Buddhism (*renjian fojiao* 人間佛教) of Yinshun 印順 (1906–2005). Their founder Zhong Mengzheng 鐘孟正 styles himself as the kind of lay preacher Yinshun describes in his “Principles for Establishing Lay Buddhism” (*Jianshe zaijia fojiao de fangzhen* 建設在家佛教的方針)⁶ and seeks to spread the Dharma among the working class people of the area, particularly young adults and youth. I first encountered the Lodge in the summer of 2014. I made a series of informal visits in the fall of 2016, and returned to conduct more formal fieldwork in the summers of 2018 and 2019. This article is a product of that ongoing work.

One of the most striking things about the Lodge is the high level of enthusiasm and the strong communal bonds that one encounters there. Like many Taiwanese lay people, Lodge-goers address one another as “brother” (*shixiong* 師兄) and “sister” (*shijie* 師姐). Yet, these terms seem not simply idiomatic, but heartfelt. The rhetoric of family permeates their collective life. Many place the community at the center of their routines, attending events weekly and in many cases almost daily. What accounts for this vitality? There are a number of factors, but here I will focus on just one key dynamic. In conversations with core volunteers and regular attendees, it appears that

together monastic temples with local nonmonastic institutions such as Longshan Temple 龍山寺.

4 Zhaiming Monastery 齋明寺 and Baota Monastery 寶塔寺 are part of the Dharma Drum and Foguang systems, respectively.

5 Bade was a city in Taoyuan county, but in 2014 the county was transformed into a special municipality and all cities within it redesignated as districts.

6 Yinshun 印順, “Jianshe zaijia fojiao de fangzhen” 建設在家佛教的方針, 81.

everyone has a story about how the Lodge changed their life in ways great or small, miraculous or quotidian. These tales hinge upon the unseen workings of karma, the saving power of repentance, and the compassionate assistance of the buddhas and bodhisattvas. Yet their social power lies less in the tale than in the telling. These testimonies of transformation serve to bind the community by validating the teller, integrating them into the community, and augmenting the charisma of its preacher, Brother Zhong.

Background

Brother Zhong founded the Lodge in 2010. A charismatic ex-gangster and autodidact, Zhong left home at a young age, falling into a life of crime and rising to become a leader of his own faction. Zhong discovered, however, that such activities did not bring happiness for himself or others, and he abandoned his life of crime after an encounter with the Dharma. He subsequently became a follower of Master Changzhao 常照, the founder of the Daci shan 大慈山 monastery and an island-wide network of lecture halls. Changzhao had been a preacher in Yiguandao 一貫道, a redemptive society that flourished in Taiwan, before abandoning the religion for Buddhism and promoting an orthodox version of the Maitreya Gate.⁷ Zhong was impressed with Changzhao and took refuge with him. Over the years that followed, he immersed himself in the practice of Maitreya Pure Land and the study of Yinshun's *Wondrous Cloud Collection* (*Miaoyun ji* 妙雲集), achieving an impressive command of Buddhist teachings. Zhong supported himself by running a series of vegetarian restaurants in Taoyuan, which he used as an opportunity to spread the Dharma.

Not long after Changzhao's passing in 2007, Zhong decided to formalize his evangelism by establishing the Lodge. With the help of a donor he rented a rundown old shopfront of a little over 2000 square feet in a poor neighborhood in Bade. There he attempted to realize the vision he saw in Yinshun's "Principles for Establishing Lay Buddhism." In this essay, written in 1963, Yinshun argues for a more assertive and organized lay Buddhism. Buddhist cultivation (*xuefo* 學佛) cannot be the sole preserve of monastics. For Buddhism to thrive in the modern era, the laity must take an active role. This program comprises two aspects: first, laity "must begin with [transforming] themselves in order to create Buddhicized families (*fohua jiating* 佛化家庭);"

⁷ Ritzinger, *Anarchy in the Pure Land*, 252–254. Intriguingly, he shares this background with Li Yuansong, the founder of Modern Chan. Ji, "Expectation, Affection and Responsibility," 52.

second, they must work together collaboratively on the basis of shared views, shared practice, and shared aspirations (*tongjian*, *tongxing*, *tongyuan* 同見、同行、同願) to organize lay Buddhist groups in order to do the work of propagation and charity.”⁸ Yinshun imagines these groups operating in parallel to the saṅgha, supplementing its deficiencies and limitations, but not supplanting it. While Yinshun anticipates monastic objections that “the white-robed [laity] preaching, while bhikṣus sit below” (*baiyi shuofa*, *biqu xiazuo* 白衣說法、比丘下坐) is a sign of the end of the Dharma (*mofa* 末法), he points to a tradition of such figures that extends from Citta the Householder (Zhiduo zhangzhe 質多長者) in the Āgamas to Vimalakīrti in the Mahāyāna canon, as well as modern figures such as Yang Renshan 楊仁山, Ouyang Jingwu 歐陽竟無, and Dharmapāla. Faith, vows, understanding, and practice (*xin yuan jie xing* 信願解行) qualify one to preach the Dharma, he argues, not ecclesiastic standing.⁹ A lay preacher of right view and right faith should be welcomed accordingly.¹⁰

The Maitreya Lodge hews closely to Yinshun’s essay. It respects monastic authority. There is no anticlerical rhetoric to be found, and criticism of the saṅgha as a whole is generally avoided, though specific practices and individuals are sometimes held up for opprobrium.¹¹ The Lodge has had relationships with various temples and individual monastics, but operates independently and without clerical supervision.¹² It places emphasis on using the Dharma to better oneself and establish harmonious, Buddhicized families. To accommodate the schedules of its attendees—who, as they often point out, “all have jobs”—events are typically held at night, well after monasteries have closed their gates. Events are also held at least six and at times seven days a week, ensuring that almost everyone can come to something if they wish.

⁸ Yinshun, “Jianshe zaijia fojiao de fangzhen,” 89.

⁹ Ibid, 86.

¹⁰ Ibid, 89.

¹¹ In this they differ from the organizations studied by Jiang Canteng that firmly reject monastic authority, leading him to dub them neo-vegetarian religion (*xin zhajiao* 新齋教). Jiang, et al. *Zhanhou taiwan hanchuan fojiao shi*, 540–541.

¹² Originally the Lodge had a close tie to Changzhao’s organization, Daci shan 大慈山, subsequently it was affiliated with Tianing Monastery 天寧寺 in the hills outside of Taipei, and finally Xinshan Monastery 心善寺 in Taoyuan’s Xinwu 新屋 district. The monastic organizations would provide ritual services that require monastics, such as the administration of the refuges, and the Lodge served as a source of volunteers. In each case, however, there was ultimately a falling out over approaches to propagating the Dharma.

Moreover, punctuality is not expected: three or four people will filter in as much as an hour late every night, without facing any raised eyebrows or reproving looks.

Scheduled events are generally evenly split between ritual and education. Ritual activities focus on sutra recitation and repentance. The *Lotus Sutra* is recited each Wednesday night, and Sundays are occupied with a fixed rotation of the Eighty-eight Buddha Repentance (*Bashiba fo chan* 八十八佛懺), recitation of the *Dizang Sutra* 地藏經; recitation of the *Sutra of Maitreya's Ascent* (*Mile shangsheng jing* 彌勒上生經) and a simple repentance rite; and a children's day that includes repentance practice. On an occasional basis, the Lodge holds many of the same events and ritual assemblies held at monasteries, such as celebrations of the Buddha's birthday (*Yufo jie* 浴佛節) and Ullambana (*Yulanpen* 盂蘭盆). Among the most important are its semiannual Eight Precept Retreats (*Baguan zhajie fahui* 八關齋戒法會). Said to have been created by Master Changzhao,¹³ but harking back to traditional Uposatha observances, this Dharma assembly involves maintaining the eight precepts, with emphasis placed on abstaining from food after midday, while engaging in a series of repentances, recitations, and listening to Dharma talks. Participants often spend the night at the Lodge as well.

Education primarily takes the form of lectures on the sutras and treatises, which are given by Zhong three days a week at 7:00 pm. Each of the three days is devoted to a different text, which range from the accessible (e.g. the *Medicine Master Sutra* [*Yaoshi jing* 藥師經], T 450) to the advanced (e.g. the *Mahāyānasamgraha* [*She dasheng lun* 攝大乘論], T 1592). The texts are typically selected from Yinshun's commentaries, or occasionally those of his students or Changzhao. These commentarial endorsements and interpretations define the boundaries of orthodoxy (*zhengxin* 正信) at the Lodge. Week by week, participants work through the chosen texts, a few sections at a time. The attendees read the scriptural passage together, after which Zhong offers a gloss based on the commentary. He expands and embellishes as he goes, often illustrating points with stories and noting parallels and connections to other texts in the canon. These talks are engaging, especially by the sometimes

¹³ I have not been able to independently confirm this claim, which has been made by Changzhao's organization. The retreat does seem to be of recent vintage, however. There are no manuals in the canon for extended, collective ritual events centered on the precepts nor can I find any reference to Dharma assemblies devoted to them in the *Minguo fojiao qikan wenxian jicheng—shumu ziliaoku* 『民國佛教期刊文獻集成』-書目資料庫 or *Taiwan fojiao qikan shuwei diancang* 《臺灣佛教》期刊數位典藏 which suggests that the ritual postdates 1970.

soporific standards of Taiwanese Buddhism, but they are not terribly innovative, but rather they cleave to the views of Yinshun and other commentators.

At the Lodge, the social engagement for which Humanistic Buddhism is known revolves mostly around food and children. Although the restaurant failed, the kitchen remains open, and Zhong serves up lunch and dinner six days a week for anyone who needs it. Diners include the brothers and sisters of the Lodge, but also local residents who are out of work or observing mourning with a forty-nine day vegetarian fast. At one time, the Lodge would occasionally designate a day to assist the needy and promote vegetarianism by giving away free vegetarian lunch boxes (*biandang* 便當). By the summer of 2019, however, this practice seems to have been discontinued in favor of preparing and distributing afterschool snacks once a week for local students passing by on their walk home.

Childcare and children's education is another focus. The Lodge has a children's room with a pair of computers, along with books and toys. Local children with unstable home lives or parents who work nights often find the Lodge a safe place to hang out and do their homework after school. One child, whose single mother worked two jobs, was dropped off at her grandmother's every morning and the Lodge every afternoon until the family's circumstances improved. Because drugs are a problem in the neighborhood, the Lodge has occasionally taken children of homes troubled by addiction under its wing, buying them shoes, teaching them to brush their teeth, and intervening when there are problems with school. Although much of this work is small scale and ad hoc, the Lodge is well known for it in the area. When I spoke with the local ward chief (*lizhang* 里長), himself a practitioner of esoteric Buddhism, it became clear to me that he thought of the Lodge primarily as charitable organization and was less aware of their ritual or educational activities.

Devotionally, Maitreya occupies a central place at the Lodge. The Lodge's main altar is centered on a framed image of the Tuṣita triad (*doushauī sanzun* 兜率三尊): Maitreya in his princely form, flanked by Bodhisattva Fayinlun 法音輪 on the left and Bodhisattva Damiaoxiang 大妙相 on the right. The image was designed by Lodge volunteers using image files from Daci shan and the internet that were then printed by a photography studio. It is attractive, placing its golden figures in sharp relief against a spare white background, but clearly inexpensive. Maitreya also adorns the right wall of the Buddha hall, depicted in a series of pictures of the bodhisattva in various poses taken from assorted Buddhist traditions. He is not the only figure depicted in the hall, however. Below the Tuṣita Triad are framed images of what has been dubbed the "Sahā triad" (*shapo sanzun* 娑婆三尊)—Śākyamuni, attended by Dizang on the left and Guanyin on the right—a configuration tied to Humanistic Buddhism in

Taiwan.¹⁴ Notably absent is Maitreya in the form of Budai 布袋. The merry monk, it seems, has been banished to more clearly differentiate the Lodge from a Buddha Hall of Yiguandao, which it might otherwise resemble. Maitreya likewise holds pride of place in ritual practice. His name is invoked at the start and end of all activities, and he is the witness to the regular rites of repentance. Yet here too the relationship is not exclusive. Other figures such as Dizang 地藏 and Medicine Buddha (Yaoshi fo 藥師佛) also figure prominently and Lodge-goers are free to practice any Dharma gate for which they feel an affinity. Maitreyan practices are encouraged, but all teachings of the Buddha are regarded as equal.

Organizationally, the Lodge is quite fluid and informal, making it difficult to quantify participation comprehensively. It has no formal membership and very little structure. Only around a half a dozen individuals have specific responsibilities. Although Zhong is clearly central to the community, he is not strictly speaking its leader. Most major decisions are made democratically at monthly meetings, at which all may speak and be heard, even the children. The core of the community is a group of twenty-some regulars, who volunteer and participate in events on a weekly, and in many cases, daily basis. Attendance at most weekly classes and recitations tends to range from a dozen to twenty participants. The biannual intensive Eight Precept Retreats draws around forty to fifty participants, and the *Yulanpen* offering, performed annually during the summer Ghost Festival, draws fifty or sixty. These larger events strain the capacity of the Lodge's roughly 900 square foot Buddha hall. The Buddha's birthday, which allows attendees to come bathe the Buddha and leave, is said to draw 100 to 150 people. There are also people who simply come individually on their own time to worship the Buddha, make repentance, light a lamp, or consult with Brother Zhong. The one quantitatively clear measure of engagement is Facebook likes, though what this translates to in real life is difficult to say. As of June 2020, this stands at 452.¹⁵ By way of comparison, the Taoyuan branch of Dharma Drum's lay association (*Fagushan hufa zonghui taoyuan fenhui* 法鼓山護法總會桃園分會) has 688.¹⁶ While there is a clear gap between the two, it is smaller than one might expect given the vastly superior prestige and resources of Dharma Drum.

Lodge attendees and volunteers are drawn from the local working class and, secondarily, from lower-level office workers. Of the core volunteers whom I

¹⁴ Zhiru, "The Emergence of the Sāhā Triad in Contemporary Taiwan."

¹⁵ Bade cishi jushilin, "Facebook page."

¹⁶ Fagushan hufa zonghui taoyuan fenhui, "Facebook page."

have spoken with at length, one (to be introduced below) repairs shoes in the market; two more run a tiny vegetarian restaurant there. Another used to have an office job with Yamaha. One conducts water quality tests for the government. There is a police officer and a mechanic, as well as several homemakers. Almost all live in the near vicinity of the Lodge, an area one volunteer described as a “slum” (*pinminku* 貧民窟). While lacking the obvious squalor that that term conjures in English, the homes are Spartan and the streets hardscrabble. Unsurprisingly, incomes are typically low, as are educational levels. Some that I have spoken to have associates degrees (*dazhuan* 大專), but only one has a bachelors. Whereas the attendance of most Taiwanese Buddhist events skews toward retirees, a wide mix of ages can be found at most Lodge events. The organization boasts a strong youth program and many events are attended by more middle-aged than retired people. Dharma classes in particular tend to be attended by working age adults and young people; the only exception is Lotus Sutra recitation, which seems to attract more retirees. Like other Buddhist groups in Taiwan, most Lodge-goers, including key volunteers, are women, but men make up a substantial minority.

Testimonials

In terms of its theology and practices, the Lodge is similar to many Buddhist organizations of a modernist bent. Maitreya may have supplanted Amitābha as the primary object of devotion, but the Lodge’s rhetoric surrounding the pure land on earth (*renjian jingtu* 人間淨土), and the importance it accords to the canon as a source of authority, would not be out of place at more prominent organizations like Dharma Drum Mountain or Foguang shan.¹⁷ Yet, its lay character and its working class origins and constituency inform a distinctive approach and set of emphases. Karma, repentance, and the saving power of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas loom large, as do the sutras’ promises of this-worldly benefits such as healing and good fortune.¹⁸

Such themes figure in the life of the Lodge in a number of ways, but one of the most striking is personal narratives and storytelling. These testimonials tell of suffering individuals whose lives are transformed through an encounter with the Dharma at the Lodge. In my fieldwork thus far, I have heard a number of

¹⁷ For a brief account of their view of Humanistic Buddhism and the Pure Land on Earth in relation to Maitreya, see Ritzinger, *Anarchy in the Pure Land*, 257–260.

¹⁸ I defer the question of how this relates to their modernist orientation to a future publication.

examples, but I will focus on three exemplary cases which appear on the Lodge's website, which I retell here augmented with details from oral tellings.

Sister Juejia

Sister Juejia 覺佳¹⁹ is a young woman in her early 30s. Today, she works diligently with her family repairing shoes in the market. As a teenager, however, she was extremely rebellious, getting into all sorts of trouble and eventually getting hooked on amphetamines. Things went from bad to worse as she became involved with an abusive man. He beat her and used drugs to control her, forcing her to do things she did not want to. When drugs and violence did not suffice, he would resort to threatening her family. One day after a particularly severe beating, she called on a friend who involved the police. They arrested the boyfriend, who already had outstanding warrants, and he went to prison, while Juejia did a stint in a Christian rehab center.

Even from prison the boyfriend continued to make threats, and when he was released after six years, he showed up demanding money in return for leaving her alone. She sought help from authorities, licit and illicit (*heidao baidao* 黑道白道), to no avail. So despite advice to the contrary, Juejia gave him one hundred fifty thousand NT.²⁰ Two months later, he was back and demanding more. A friend took Juejia to the Lodge to seek the Dharma from Brother Zhong. Zhong informed her that the man was in fact a karmic debt owner (*yuanqin zhaizhu* 冤親債主) from a previous existence, and the debt had to be repaid with merit, not cash. Despite misgivings, Juejia began to repent on the man's behalf and dedicate the merit to him. She did so for two months, culminating in an Eight Precept Retreat, in which she dedicated the merit of her fast to him. After that, the calls stopped. Juejia asked Brother Zhong if she needed to continue to dedicate merit to him, but he told her that the matter was resolved. He would not bother her again. Juejia had been an atheist, but now she was moved by faith and gratitude. In the year that followed, she turned to her financial difficulties. Since theft leads to poverty, she repented for theft committed in this and prior lives, paying off an accumulated debt of one million

¹⁹ At the time she wrote her testimonial, she used a different Dharma name, Puyin 普尹. While the name has not been updated on the website, I am using the current name here for the sake of consistency with future publications.

²⁰ Approximately 5000 USD and almost four times the average monthly salary of 40,000 NT earned by most workers Juejia's age according to some estimates. Liao, "Taiwan's Average Salary is NT\$50,000' Doesn't Reflect Reality: Minister of Labor."

NT dollars (33,000 USD) in the process, and even quitting cigarettes through the power of the Dharma. She has been a dedicated volunteer at the Lodge ever since and now serves as its youth director.²¹

Sister Secrets

The seventy year old woman known as Sister Secrets (Mimi shijie 秘密師姐) describes herself as “ill-fated” (*daiming* 歹命). Entangled with illness from birth, nine years ago she suffered a severe stroke and was dying of cancer. Sores in her mouth and throat made eating and drinking difficult. Her vision was failing. The doctors had not given her long to live. Things seemed hopeless until she met a woman who offered to bring her to the Lodge. Sister Secrets thought, “I’ve worshipped all kinds of gods and it hasn’t done any good, but there’s no harm in trying one more.” At the Lodge, she encountered Brother Zhong, who saw what the doctors could not: the true source of her illness in past karma. He taught her to offer lamps to the Buddha and to repent before Maitreya, and enjoined her to maintain a vegetarian diet. After a month of daily repentance and offerings, Sister Secrets was able to eat and drink again.

Today, years after being told she had only months to live, Sister Secrets is in full remission. “In the Maitreya gate,” she told me, “all prayers are answered” (*you qiu bi ying* 有求必應). Out of gratitude for Maitreya’s protection she volunteers every day in the Lodge’s kitchen and practices repentance and sutra recitation daily. Lingering effects of her stroke and cancer forced her to speak briefly, and in a low whisper, when she first began volunteering, earning her the affectionate nickname “Sister Secrets.”²²

Brother Juewei

When Brother Juewei 覺瑋 first came to the Lodge in 2014 he was in a difficult position. Some years prior a friend had gotten him mixed up in a venture that resulted in over seven million NT of debt.²³ The sudden reversal of fortunes turned his life upside down, forcing him to tighten his belt, sell off property, and endure abuse and intimidation. Every month almost his entire salary went toward paying off his debt. Hopes that his family might help were disappointed,

21 “Chanmo pian” 懺摩篇, *Fojiao bade cishi jushilin* 佛教八德慈氏居士林.

22 “Cishi menzhong bu she yi ren” 慈氏門中不捨一人, *Fojiao bade cishi jushilin* 佛教八德慈氏居士林.

23 Approximately 230,000 USD at the time.

leaving him feeling frustrated and isolated. In desperation, he sought all manner of spiritual assistance: worshipping at various temples, visiting fortune-tellers, drinking talisman water, changing his name, and becoming involved with Yiguandao.

Then circumstances brought him into contact with Sister Juejia, who brought him to Brother Zhong to seek the Dharma, just as her friend had done for her. And just as he had done with others, Zhong showed Juewei that the true source of his difficulty lay in past karma and instructed him to wholeheartedly repent each day and dedicate the merit to the offended party. Within weeks, an agreement was reached through a debt consolidation organization (*zhai xie hui* 債協會), allowing Juewei to clear his debt within six months. Juewei continued to repent until the matter was fully resolved. Afterward, he took refuge in the Three Jewels and began to study the Dharma, turning his ritual efforts to his mother, whose kidneys had nearly failed. Brother Juewei practiced repentance, offered lamps, and participated in Eight Precept Retreats, dedicating the merit to the karmic debt owners within her body (*tinei yuanqin zhaizhu* 體內冤親債主). Miraculously, her kidneys began to return to normal and her health and spirits improved. Freed from his suffering and resentment, and grateful to Zhong and the Lodge for their assistance, Juewei has been a regular participant in their events ever since.²⁴

Common Features

Similar stories are told by many at the Lodge. The details vary, but the basic structure is always the same. At the outset, the individual faces some concrete personal difficulty. Financial burdens, health problems, and relationship difficulties of the sort we have just seen are common. This contrasts with the more nebulous dissatisfaction that often afflicts affluent Buddhists.²⁵ Oftentimes other solutions, spiritual or secular, are tried but without effect. Then, there is a serendipitous encounter with the Lodge typically mediated by another person. Someone—a friend, a neighbor, their own child—takes them to the Lodge and introduces them to Brother Zhong. Zhong shows them that the true cause of their seemingly impossible difficulty lies not in the immediate

²⁴ “Cishi menzhong bu she yi ren—Juewei” 慈氏門中不捨一人-覺瑋, *Fojiao bade cishi jushilin* 佛教八德慈氏居士林.

²⁵ See, for example, the woman who complains to Master Sheng Yen that she “has it all” yet is still not happy. Sheng Yen 聖嚴, *Zhihui 100* 智慧一〇〇, 21–23.

situation, but in the unseen forces of karma. In this life or another they incurred a karmic debt, and to clear that debt they must perform repentance and make offerings, dedicating the merit to their debt owners, or *yuanqin zhaizhu*. Zhong diagnoses the problem and teaches the afflicted person how to properly repent and make offerings to address it. In relatively short order the problem is miraculously resolved. Convinced of the saving power of the Dharma, and grateful for the guidance and support of Zhong, the afflicted person takes the refuges and becomes a committed brother or sister of the Lodge, integrated into a new community.

Thematically, the image of karmic debt owners is illuminating. As Zhong broke it down for me, the term “*yuanqin*” 冤親 refers to two different dynamics. In the case of *yuan*, literally “grievance,” there is an unpaid debt just as if one borrowed money in this life and did not pay it back. Typically, the debt owner seeks vengeance (*baochou* 報仇). If someone shot you, Zhong explained, you might want to shoot them back. *Qin*, or “intimacy,” is a little different. This dynamic is rooted in love, but tainted with excessive attachment (*ranzhuo tai yanzhong le* 染著太嚴重了). For instance, Zhong explained, someone might “love someone so much” (*hen ai hen ai* 很愛很愛), but then the person does something displeasing and that love curdles into enmity (*fanmu chengchou* 反目成仇). This is less severe than grievance, but still a source of trouble.²⁶

A second division, crosscutting the first, is drawn between proximate (*zhoubian* 周邊) and bodily (*tinei* 體內) karmic debt owners. “Proximate” refers to people to whom one might owe a karmic debt. Juejia’s ex-boyfriend falls under this category. Other examples include an unfilial son and a baby that won’t sleep through the night. This also includes ghosts (*guidao zhongsheng* 鬼道眾生) awaiting the opportunity to enter your body. Once these spirits do so, they become “bodily” karmic debt owners. Should the karmic debt be heavy, these bodily debt owners might manifest as cancer cells, as in the case of Sister Secrets, or organ failure, as in the case of Juewei’s mother’s kidneys. A less heavy debt will bring less serious affliction. While disease and poor health has

²⁶ One time in 2016 Zhong told me that this should be understood as a convenient expedient for discussing the workings of karma. One other Lodge-goer said the same. Everything else I have heard and seen, however, points to a literal understanding. The testimonials discussed here all predate those responses. The multiple lengthy discussions of the idea with Zhong and Juejia in 2018 also did not include any mention of the idea as a mere expedient. It may be that it was referred to in this manner because they were not yet comfortable with me. Or perhaps they were entertaining the possibility of a non-literal interpretation at that time, but subsequently rejected it.

often been construed as the product of karma—our bodies are, after all, “primary retribution” (*zhengbao* 正報)—the connotations here are rather different than the impersonal language of karmic obstructions (*yezhang* 業障) with which scholars are more familiar.²⁷ The image of “debt owners” who must be paid back is both easy to understand and emotionally resonant for lower income people who often have issues with more conventional debt, as we saw in Juejia and Juewei’s testimonies.

It also points to the importance of relationality in these stories. The afflicted individual often suffers from a strained or toxic relationship, or has been socially isolated by their problem or their circumstance. This is paralleled in the unseen world by strained and toxic relationships with their karmic debt owners. These issues are resolved when they enter into a relationship with Zhong, frequently through the mediation of another person.²⁸ In the process of rectifying their relationship to their karmic debt owners, they also become disciples of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, gaining powerful protectors and patrons; and brothers and sisters of the Lodge, gaining a new set of relationships and a surrogate family.

This way of framing the workings of karma has gone largely unnoticed in English language scholarship, but the term *yuanqin zhaizhu* has broad currency in Taiwanese religion and a long history in China. The 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.²⁹ “Karmic debt owners” are invoked in discussions of interpersonal difficulty as a kind of

27 See, for instance, connection between Ouyi’s views of the body and karma studied by Beverley Foulks McGuire. McGuire, *Living Karma*, 93–124. Although Ouyi discusses bodily karma in more impersonal terms, in both cases there is a sense in which illness makes the hidden forces of karma manifest.

28 Guggenmos also notes the importance of personal networks in affiliating with Buddhist organizations. “*I Believe in Buddhism and Traveling*”: *Denoting Oneself a Lay Buddhist in Contemporary Urban Taiwan*, 323. Chao has observed this as well in Taiwanese Protestant milieu. “Conversion to Protestantism among Urban Immigrants in Taiwan.”

29 Among respondents to the most recent iteration of the Taiwan Social Change Survey, 64.5% believe that affinities (*yuanfen* 緣分) are determined by previous lives. 46.5% believe that a bad marriage is the result of a karmic debt and 44.7% believe the same of the labor of raising children. No one responded that they did not understand the question. Fu Yangzhi 傅仰止, et al. *Taiwan shehui bianqian jiben diaocha jihua: di qi qi di si ci diaocha jihua zhixing baogao* 台灣社會變遷基本調查計畫：第七期第四次調查計畫執行報告, 178–179.

classical idiom (*chengyu* 成語),³⁰ much as “karmic affinity” (*yuanfen* 緣分) is invoked in discussions of romantic relationships and daughters are said to have been their father’s beloved (*qingren* 情人) from a past life. The idea of karmic debt owners as afflicting ghosts is also common.³¹ These ideas can be traced back to late imperial literature, where conflicts rooted in karmic debts from past lives was a common plot device,³² as well as to popular religious literature, in which afflicting spirits of aggrieved parties were a dramatic way to illustrate the wages of sin.³³

Yet while found in popular religion and culture, the roots of the idea are ultimately Buddhist. The idea of karma playing out through relationships is frequently seen in Buddhist narrative literature. Several of the tales in Ouyi Zhixu’s 藕益智旭 (1599–1655) collection of karma stories, *Record of Things Seen and Heard* (*Jianwen lu* 見聞錄, X 1641), involve karmic debt owners, though the term is not used. Three stories involve men killed or about to be killed by those whom they killed or harmed in a past life, while another involves literal debtors reborn as beasts of burden in their creditor’s household.³⁴ The idea that karma works itself out interpersonally through cycles of vengeance enacted across lifetimes can be found in translations of Indic literature as well.³⁵ The notion that aggrieved parties from past lives can cause illness is also found in the canon. Perhaps the most famous instance of this trope is the

³⁰ Jiang Canteng 江燦騰, personal communication May 22, 2018. I owe the English translation to a Taiwanese Buddhist friend with Foguang shan affiliations. It is less faithful than “karmic creditor” but more aptly captures the menace implied in the Chinese.

³¹ The fetus ghosts studied by Marc Moskowitz, for instance, may be considered *yuanqin zhaizhu*. Moskowitz, *The Haunting Fetus*.

³² For instance, in “Sima Mao Played the Role of Judge in Hell,” the rise and fall of Han is given a karmic twist as Liu Bang is reborn as Han Xiandi who dies at the hands of Cao Cao, who was once Han Xin, a general unjustly slain by Liu. Kao, “Bao and Baoying: Narrative Causality and External Motivations in Chinese Fiction,” 132

³³ For example, the precious scrolls on female infanticide being studied by Katherine Alexander in which drowned baby girls are reborn in their mother’s womb to seek revenge. Katherine Alexander, personal communication, April 10, 2019.

³⁴ Cheung, “Popular Conceptions of Karma, Rebirth, and Retribution in Seventeenth-century China,” 61–64.

³⁵ For instance, in the tale of Ciñca the Malevolent studied by Alan Wagner, the Buddha is slandered by Ciñca as the father of her unborn child (actually a large wooden dipper secured under her clothes) because in a past life he robbed her of the opportunity to purchase a set of precious pearls. Wagner, “Ciñca the Malevolent.”

tale of the eminent monk Zhixuan 知玄 (618–907). Guarded by his virtue for many lives, the monk succumbed to pride at receiving imperial recognition, which opened his body up to invasion by a ghost that had been nursing a grudge for centuries. This aggrieved spirit manifested as a boil on his leg that resembled a human face (*renmian chuang* 人面瘡) and even spoke. This tale is the charter account for the origins of the popular *Compassionate Samadhi Water Repentance* (*Cibei sanmei shui chan* 慈悲三昧水懺),³⁶ which is traditionally attributed to Zhixuan, and karmic debt owners and the need to “resolve grievance and loosen its bonds” (*jieyuan shijie* 解怨釋結) are commonly invoked in repentance rites and other rituals.³⁷ This interpersonal understanding of the mechanism of karmic fruition sits uneasily with modernist approaches that treat it as a quasi-Newtonian law, which may be why Yinshun eschews the term, as does Taixu 太虛, although other figures such as Sheng Yen 聖嚴 do use it on occasion³⁸

The Role of Testimonials in the Community

Narratives of this sort are ubiquitous at the Lodge. It sometimes seems that everyone has some story of a life turned around through the Dharma. A few

³⁶ This story is not to be found in Zhixuan’s biography in the *Song gaoseng zhuan* 宋高僧傳 (T 2061, 50: 743b04–744c14). The earliest canonical telling seems to be in the Yuan-dynasty *Shishi jigu lue* 釋氏稽古略 (T 2037, 49: 840b25–c9). It is repeated in the preface to the *Cibei shui chan* 慈悲水懺法 of 1416 (T 1910, 45: 967c27–968c11) and in Zhixuan’s biography in the *Shenseng zhuan* 神僧傳 of the following year (T 2064, 50: 1007b19–c13). It is also retold in the modern period even by reformist figures such as Yinshun and Yanpei. Yinshun 印順, *Chengfo zhi dao* 成佛之道, 86; Yanpei 演培, *Cibei sanmei shui chan jiangji* 慈悲三昧水懺講記, 4–7.

³⁷ See for example: the *Cibei daochang chanfa* 慈悲道場懺法, better known as the *Lianghuang baochan* 梁皇寶懺 (T 1909, 45: 942a21–c1). The dating for this text is rather uncertain. According to David Chappell, there are references to six-fascicle versions in two ninth-century Japanese catalogs. The extant version, however, is ten fascicles. The earliest reference to a version of that length is the Song dynasty. Chappell, “The Precious Scroll of the Liang Emperor,” 64 n3. Be that as it may, the variant term “*yuanjia zhaizhu*” 冤家債主 is also attested in the Song dynasty in works such as Zhili’s 知禮, *Pusa jie yi* 菩薩戒儀 found in *Siming zunzhe jiaoxing lu* 四明尊者教行錄 (T 1937, 46: 862a15–25).

³⁸ Sheng Yen 聖嚴, *Xuefo qunyi* 學佛群疑, 70, 76, and 198; and *Nianfo sheng jingtu* 念佛生淨土, 22 and 87–89.

individuals, including those discussed above, have composed written testimonials that are featured on the Lodge's website. Most, however, simply recount them orally. This is done in the course of casual conversation rather than the ritualized manner seen, for instance, in Tzu Chi.³⁹ In my experience, they are told fluidly and without pause to recall details.⁴⁰ They are also told with little variation, whereas in other stories details or even episodes are included or omitted depending on the context and the vagaries of memory. All this suggests they are dearly held and often retold. Individuals also know and tell these stories about one another as well, at least the more dramatic ones. When I expressed interest in such things, for instance, multiple people told me that I had to speak with Sister Secrets, so that she could tell me how she was cured of cancer. Such stories are “*jingcai*” 精彩—exciting—and told for entertainment as well as edification.

The stories also play an important role in Zhong's sermons, in which the workings of karma, the saving assistance of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, and the transforming power of repentance are central topics. Like many successful preachers, Zhong frequently makes his points with narrative. This was illustrated clearly in the sermon he delivered for an Eight Precept Retreat I attended in 2016. Whereas on most other occasions, Zhong simply glosses and riffs on texts from Yinshun's *Wondrous Cloud Collection*, for the retreat he gives free form talks on the meaning of the precepts and the benefits of participating in the assembly. His explanations interweave stories from the canon with tales of retribution and redemption from the community. The precept against killing, for example, was illustrated with a Jataka tale in which the Buddha was afflicted with a headache because of youthful involvement in fishing in a past life (*Foshuo xingqi xingjing* 佛說興起行經, T 197, 4: 166c07–167a22), along with the case of Zhong's own estranged son, whose love of fishing made it difficult for his wife to conceive. He shows his listeners that the Eight Precept Retreat can help people just like them by telling stories of people whose problems were resolved in part through the merit of the assembly, such as the cases of Juejia; or another woman, who recovered from stage three ovarian cancer.

³⁹ Huang, *Charisma and Compassion*, 98 and 119–122.

⁴⁰ Sister Secrets, who still has a bit of difficulty speaking because of her stroke, is an exception.

Functions of Narration

These storytelling practices achieve three key effects: they validate the teller, integrate the community, and augment the charisma of its preacher Brother Zhong. For the subjects of these narratives, their telling serves to elevate personal tragedy and difficulty. What might have been simply an individual problem is transformed into an episode of the universal story of the Buddha's salvation. In the first phase of these narratives, the tellers typically feel powerless and isolated. Through the understanding of karma opened up by their encounter with Zhong, however, they are empowered with a new agency. In this narrative, a new sense of self is constructed in which the narrator is constituted as one who can perceive the workings of unseen forces and take meaningful action with the help of powerful patrons.⁴¹ This is reinforced over time as each telling reshapes and reinforces that construction of memory, erasing other factors and construals.⁴² At the same time, the teller becomes a preacher, sharing the promise of the Dharma with others, and the individual, ordinary or even marginal, becomes an exemplar. As both subject and storyteller, they are able to “perform self-worth,” in Alison Denton Jones felicitous phrasing.⁴³ This effect is then reinforced when the story is retold by others. When Brother Zhong paused a sermon on the power of repentance to ask Juejia if he could retell her story, she responded with an enthusiastic “Yes!” (*keyi* 可以), and beamed with pleasure as she was once again transfigured from a recovering addict and abused woman into a member of the Dharmic cognoscenti and an illustration of the saving power of the Buddhas.

The telling of these stories also integrates the teller into the community of the Lodge. The narrators reconstruct themselves socially in the telling, transforming an isolated and beleaguered individual into a member of a community seen and unseen. Like Christian conversion narratives, they are, in part, about belonging. But more than that, learning to tell such stories is part of the acculturation process of joining the community. By construing their

⁴¹ As one woman at the Lodge told me, “Before I encountered Buddhism, I just took a lot of things for granted without giving it much thought (*hen duo shiqing hui juede shi lisuodangran de* 很多事情會覺得是理所當然的)—pains in my body, difficulty in my life—but actually it is karma from past lives.”

⁴² On the role of personal karmic narrative in self-construction and memory in a Thai context, see: Carlisle, “Creative Sincerity.”

⁴³ Jones, “A Modern Religion?,” 205. Fisher notes a similar dynamic among his marginalized Buddhist interlocutors in Beijing. Fisher, *From Comrades to Bodhisattvas*, 93.

experience in terms of the Lodge's vision of Buddhism and according to features of their particular genre of karmic narrative, they synchronize their experience of the world with that of their new community.⁴⁴ In addition, just as the telling of these stories recasts individual experience as an episode of a universal story of salvation, it also becomes part of the anthology of the community, a point in its implicit argument: "This is a special place, where special things happen, even to ordinary people like us." The individual's story thus both serves as proof of the community's claims and gives individuals a stake in it, by intertwining it with their own sense of self and biography.

Finally, these narratives play a key role in the construction of Brother Zhong's charisma. Obviously, they serve to establish, spread, and consolidate his reputation. Within these stories, Zhong is the pivot. It is he who introduces the transforming wisdom and saving power of the Dharma. Zhong strictly rejects any suggestion that he is personally special, claiming only to transmit the Dharma as found in the sutras. He is able to diagnose individual's karmic troubles through his mastery of scripture rather than any supernatural power. Nevertheless, he serves as the essential mediator, bridging the gap between the often difficult teachings of the canon and a community with a relatively low level of education. In each telling, this function is reiterated as is his pivotal role in the life of both the individual's biography and of the community. Zhong's incorporation of personal narratives in his preaching centers him still other ways. First, by retelling the stories of others, Zhong circulates them through the community stamping them with the imprimatur of his authority and making personal truth public fact. Second, by interweaving such stories together with tales taken from the canon he elevates them to a kind of paracanonical status. Tacking back and forth from tales of the original disciples and his own followers makes the implicit point clear: what happened to them then happens to you now. Zhong is thus essential to the interweaving of personal experience into universal and communal narrative, further reinforcing his own charisma.

To understand the importance of these narrative practices to Zhong's charisma, it is useful to take Zhengyan 證嚴 as a point of contrast. As C. Julia Huang has documented, Zhengyan is absolutely central to Tzu Chi. Her personal charisma is the anchor of the entire organization. As that organization grew, a strategy of "glorification" was adopted. Zhengyan came to be referred to as "her exaltedness" (*shangren* 上人)⁴⁵ and there was a media explosion in which her words and image were circulated ever more pervasively. Seats in branch offices

⁴⁴ Carlisle, "Synchronizing Karma."

⁴⁵ Huang renders this as "supreme person."

and transportation even came to be reserved for her and her alone, representing her absent presence.⁴⁶ In contrast, Zhong pursues a strategy of condescension. While he is ever present at the Lodge, he is not ever central. He sits at the front of the room to preach the Dharma but on ritual occasions he stands with everyone else and allows others to lead the proceedings. He does not claim the title of “master” (*fashi* 法師) or even “teacher” (*laoshi* 老師), let alone “his exaltedness.” He is referred to simply as “brother,” the same term of address used by the community for every adult male follower of the Buddha. While his teachings are all over the Lodge’s website, and occasionally its Facebook page, they are invariably unsigned. Indeed, his name and picture scarcely appear on the Lodge’s website at all. The contrast between this humble presentation and his narrative centrality multiplies the charismatic effect, but also makes that narrative centrality that much more critical.

Non-exemplary Cases, Failures, and Intractable Problems

Thus far, our attention has been occupied with exemplary cases. We have examined the testimonials that have been published online, those that are more frequently told, those that are recounted not just by the protagonist or Zhong but by others. But what of non-exemplary cases? What about the failures? Or simply intractable problems? I believe that the dynamics sketched out above create a charismatic atmosphere that helps to explain some of the more quotidian miracles attributed to repentance under Brother Zhong’s direction. The telling and retelling of these stories creates an “expectation of the extraordinary.”⁴⁷ As a result, some individuals look for data to support the theory, emplotting minor or predictable improvements in their lives according to the conventions we have seen. On my first visit to the Lodge, I spoke to a man, probably in his mid to late 50s at the time, who told me that repentance had improved his eyesight. Since he had begun practicing at the Lodge, he scarcely needed glasses anymore. Minor improvements in eyesight are not uncommon, much less miraculous, and any improvement was clearly slight: despite his claim, he still wore his glasses. Here we might hypothesize that attraction to the community, or perhaps a desire to feel special, led him to seize on something quite minor as proof of efficacy.

⁴⁶ Huang, *Charisma and Compassion*, 34–37. See also the rest of chapter 1 as well as chapter 3.

⁴⁷ Ownby, Goossaert, and Ji, “Introduction,” in *Making Saints in Modern China*, 16–17.

The case of the child who would not sleep through the night is another example. As the mother tells the story, she initially became involved with the Lodge due to prior connections with Daci shan rather than a quest to resolve a crisis. Nevertheless, when her daughter would not sleep through the night, she brought the problem to Zhong, who explained that her daughter was a karmic debt owner from a past life and that she needed to repent on her behalf. She did and eventually her little girl started sleeping through the night. Here we have an utterly everyday problem. Many children have trouble sleeping through the night and almost all of them eventually grow out of it on their own. We might surmise that Zhong gave a stressed out mother a sense of agency in the face of a problem that she was unable to control, allowing her to bear up until the problem resolved of itself. It may even be that it brought her a calmness that allowed her to soothe her daughter. Expecting the extraordinary, however, she found what she was looking for, or rather created it by recasting a predictable resolution as a miraculous one.

Certainly, in many cases individuals come to Zhong with a problem and fail to see the improvement. My suspicion is that many of these simply fail to be drawn into deeper engagement with the Lodge, and thus escape my observation. In our exemplary cases, the Lodge was where individuals finally found success after a long search for help. For many others, no doubt, the search simply continued. Esther-Maria Guggenmos offers an example of something like this in her monograph. One of her interviewees, “Luo Peirong,” became involved with a Buddhist organization because it helped her resolve one crisis psychologically, but she ultimately left in search of supernatural efficacy when further crises struck.⁴⁸ There are also unknown numbers of people who did see the desired result, but were not drawn into involvement with the Lodge. One example of this is Zhong’s own son. While Zhong likes to tell the story of how he helped to resolve his son and daughter-in-law’s fertility problems by counseling him to abandon fishing and practice repentance, this did not repair the rift in their relationship.

There is also at least one individual who failed to find relief yet remained at the Lodge. This woman had an unhappy home life, which included three children (ages 18, 16, and 15 when we spoke in 2018) with whom she had difficult relationships. Under Zhong’s direction she began to practice repentance in order to repay her karmic debts to them. For a time things seemed to improve, but then matters deteriorated again. She returned to Zhong to seek

⁴⁸ Guggenmos, “*I Believe in Buddhism and Traveling*”: *Denoting Oneself a Lay Buddhist in Contemporary Urban Taiwan*, 89–112.

clarification. With probing, it emerged that the woman had had abortions in the past. It is unclear if she felt her children were the aborted fetuses reborn or if their spirits lingered, exercising a negative influence on her relationship with her living children. Regardless, her karma was heavier than was initially recognized, which was taken to explain the lack of immediate success. This recalls Marc Moskowitz's research on Taiwanese beliefs surrounding fetus ghosts in the late 1990s. In his work, he hypothesizes that when consulted by suffering clients, ritualists would often default to a diagnosis of a fetus haunting. This was because they were "ghosts with better odds," since abortion is very common in Taiwan but also often a source of guilt, and such spirits had clear reasons for grievance.⁴⁹ As such, it may also have provided Zhong and the woman a ready-at-hand explanation for ritual failure as well.

Conclusion

Stories of personal transformation thus play a key role in the enthusiasm and commitment seen among the Lodge's brothers and sisters. In these testimonies, individuals' lives are transformed through an encounter with the Dharma, mediated by the Lodge's preacher Brother Zhong. By revealing the hidden karmic debts that afflict them, Zhong opens up the possibility for meaningful action, teaching them to repent and make merit to address the underlying cause of their suffering. Telling these stories validates the individual by constructing a new biography in which they are not a victim but an agent and an exemplary case of the saving power of the Dharma. It recasts their personal experience as an episode in a universal narrative of salvation. At the same time, learning to tell their tales in the accepted idiom serves to acculturate the teller into community and weaves their tale into an anthology of lives transformed. Finally, the testimonials augment Brother Zhong's charisma. They incorporate him into the teller's biography at a key moment, while his retelling lifts their story up to paracanonical status and circulates it through the community. As such they constitute a key source of his charisma and are authorized by that charisma in turn. While not equally effective for all who encounter the Lodge, these storytelling practices create a charismatic atmosphere that encourages individuals to identify ordinary marvels within their own experience, from which to craft their own personal karmic narratives to tell and share. In this way, the brothers and sisters of the Lodge are woven together on a loom of narrative.

⁴⁹ Moskowitz, *The Haunting Fetus*, 52.

In some respects, we can see significant continuity here with popular religion. The governing idiom of karmic debt owners is ubiquitous in that milieu, and we can find parallels between the tales told at the Lodge and those told at institutions such as the Dizang Abbey 地藏庵 in Xinzhuang 新莊 studied by Paul Katz. There, too, individuals recount how their difficulties, often caused by karmic debt owners, were resolved through a successful ritual intervention, typically with the help of a religious professional, and circulate those tales in writing and online.⁵⁰ This similarity suggests an important overlap between the Lodge and the broader religious culture. The Lodge, too, operates within the same economy of numinous efficacy (*ling* 靈), a perennial concern of popular religion, and in its narratives we often see a search for help that reaches out to various claimants to spiritual power. This likely lowers the threshold for entry into the Lodge, making it more accessible and legible. This lends support to Esther-Maria Guggenmos' argument that Taiwanese Buddhism exerts an "integrative power" vis-à-vis the broader field of Taiwanese religion by virtue of its many points of commonality and compatibility with popular practice, allowing it to "[soak] up individuals and organizations with various backgrounds and interests."⁵¹ In a country where popular religion is the most pervasive tradition,⁵² it offers familiar ways to "do religion" that can in some cases draw individuals further along a continuum of understanding and involvement.

The case of the Lodge, however, offers an opportunity to push Guggenmos' insight a bit further. Like the present study, Guggenmos highlights the importance of personal narrative. Yet, perhaps as an artifact of her primary methodology—in-depth individual interviews rather than participant observation—she treats Taiwanese Buddhists primarily as autonomous agents engaged in self-construction using Buddhism as a "resource" to that end. The brothers and sisters of the Lodge are clearly engaged in narrative acts of self-construction, but they are collaborative rather than simply individual processes. The Lodge serves as what Alison Denton Jones terms an "interaction setting," a place "where people are exposed to other's perspectives and may have to

50 Katz, *Divine Justice*, 172–176. For current examples, see: "Ganxie Zhuang" 感謝狀, *Xinzhuang dizang an* 新莊地藏庵.

51 Guggenmos, "I Believe in Buddhism and Traveling": Denoting Oneself a Lay Buddhist in Contemporary Urban Taiwan, 327–328. See also 218.

52 49.3% of the population follow popular religion vs. 14% who follow Buddhism. Fu Yangzhi 傅仰止, et al. *Taiwan shehui bianqian jiben diaocha jihua* 台灣社會變遷基本調查計畫, 169.

express or defend their own.”⁵³ The social context of the Lodge provides exemplary tales that define the conventions of the narrative. It offers an audience that validates tales and their tellers by listening. And through retellings by others, especially Brother Zhong, it reifies these tales externally. Through these narrative practices, the Lodge does not just passively “soak up” individuals but actively draws them into Buddhist practice.

While Guggenmos is almost certainly correct that the Buddhist field as a whole has low barriers both to entrance and to exit, I would suggest that the forms of karmic storytelling at the Lodge point to one reason some communities may be “stickier” than others. The Dizang Abbey again serves as a useful point of comparison. There, too, we find testimonials, but they differ in key respects. First, they are anonymous, signed only with a surname. Second, while in effect they are testimonials, in form they are thank-you cards. They state the problem and express gratitude to the deity for his intervention. The primary relationship constructed is thus between the supplicant and the god. On the human plane, they testify anonymously to a faceless audience that might read their testimonial or not. The ties formed by this narrative act are vertical rather than horizontal. They may serve to augment the deity’s reputation for efficacy, but they do not build a community. Missing here, but found at the Lodge, is the biographical reconstruction that Lewis Rambo says is characteristic of conversion, in which “the convert’s life history is incorporated into the ideology and narrative presented, so that the group’s story becomes the convert’s story in a very powerful and emotional way.”⁵⁴ Particularly insofar as this biographical reconstruction might not be validated elsewhere, it incentivizes remaining involved in the community. This is perhaps particularly true of less socially advantaged individuals with fewer opportunities for validation elsewhere, as Fisher’s work with marginalized Buddhists in Beijing suggests.⁵⁵

This analysis does not exhaust the reasons that people become involved with the Lodge, of course. Nor is it meant to. In this article we have attempted only to shed light on just one key dynamic: the role karmic storytelling can play in establishing charisma and fostering community. In the process, we have further demonstrated the continuity of Buddhism with popular religion in Taiwan noted by Guggenmos and illustrated the way in which a community’s storytelling practices exercise integrative power vis-à-vis that broader religious milieu to not only draw people into the Buddhist field but retain them. This study thus

⁵³ Jones, “A Modern Religion?,” 138.

⁵⁴ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 82.

⁵⁵ Fisher, *From Comrades to Bodhisattvas*, 203.

shows the importance of attending not only to the critical role played by narrative self-constructions but also the contexts in which they are constructed.

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