

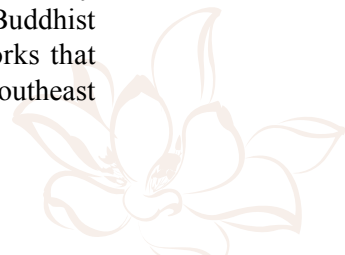
## When Mahāyāna Meets Theravāda: Humanistic Buddhism's Challenges and Opportunities in Myanmar



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## Introduction

From 15 to 17 February 2017, the United Association of Humanistic Buddhism of Chunghua (*Zhonghua renjian fojiao lianhe zonghui* 中華人間佛教聯合總會)<sup>1</sup> organized a visit to Myanmar for a three-day meeting regarding harmony and dialogue between Mahāyāna and Theravāda Buddhism (*Liang'an nanbei chuan fojiao ronghe jiaoliu fangwen zhi lu* 兩岸南北傳佛教融合交流訪問之旅).<sup>2</sup> As well as being noteworthy for uniting Mahāyāna and Theravāda Buddhist Schools, this cross-traditional exchange was important due to the involvement of the National Sangha Committee Chairman, Venerable Bamaw Sayadaw Dr. Bhadanta Kumarabhivamsa; other well-known senior Burmese monks; and Myanmar government officials. During their stay in Yangon, the monastic delegates joined in various activities including the Thousand-candle Offering, a forum on Educational Exchange on Mahāyāna and Theravāda Teachings, and visits to monasteries, Buddhist educational institutions and sites of historical interest in the company of Burmese monks and laypeople. Additionally, Tipitakadhara Sayadaw U Sundara guided them in the Vipassanā Meditation. To an extent, then, the group of delegates from Taiwan and Mainland China experienced Theravāda practices. Afterwards, Ven. Foxing<sup>3</sup> from the Buddhist College of

- 1 The United Association of Humanistic Buddhism (UAHBC) was established in 2015 in Taiwan and has been cooperating with 300 Taiwanese Buddhist monasteries to promote the idea and the practice of “*renjian fojiao*”. Venerable Master Hsing Yun is its honorary president.
- 2 For more information, see <http://www.lnanews.com/news/兩岸南北傳佛教融合交流%E3%80%80首訪緬甸.html> and <http://www.merit-times.com.tw/NewsPage.aspx?unid=462411> (accessed 22 September 2019).
- 3 Foxing Shi (釋佛心), “*Tongzhong youyi yizhong youtong nanbei chuan fojiao de ronghe* 同中有異，異中有同——南北傳佛教的融合,” *Humanistic Buddhism: Journal, Arts, and Culture* 8 (2017): 384-389.

Minnan and Julia Jin,<sup>4</sup> president of the *Merit Times*, each wrote on the possibilities for Mahāyāna and Theravāda union in the house periodical of the Fo Guang Shan Institute of Humanistic Buddhism.

While this mission to Myanmar (and Thailand) aimed at so-called cultural exchange and, ultimately, convergence between the Mahāyāna and Theravāda traditions, it is worth reflecting on its true significance for future cross-traditional monastic dialogue and cooperation. Equally, it is worth exploring how, and how much, the Mahāyāna tradition is impacting and influencing contemporary Myanmar at the important historical juncture represented by the recent conference described above.<sup>5</sup> In this context, the present study looks at the potential for cross-traditional collaboration in both Buddhist propagation and social contribution; and in a broader sense, how Humanistic Buddhism can pass beyond its original geographical boundaries, i.e., Taiwan and China, as befits the theme of the Symposium “Humanistic Buddhism and the Future”

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4 Shuqing Jin (金蜀卿), “Dui hua yu jiao liu – nan bei chuan fo jiao de rong he zhi lu 對話與交流—南北傳佛教的融合之旅,” *Humanistic Buddhism: Journal, Arts, and Culture* 8 (2017): 374-383.

5 In the past few decades, some religious activities have involved cooperation between practitioners of Mahāyāna and Theravāda Buddhism. In 2003, for example, a representative of Taiwan’s Nanlin nunnery was invited to a Buddhist temple in Sri Lanka to greet the precious Relics of Sakyamuni, and announced that this would be the beginning of a mutual exchange of *vinaya* and *dharma* between Sri Lanka and Taiwan. Another example is that of Thai Hua Temple (泰華寺), recently established in Bangkok by Taiwan’s Fo Guang Shan Monastery, specifically as a center of exchange between Mahāyāna and Theravāda Buddhism. Several Chinese Mahāyāna monks attended the 2017 consecration ceremony for the new temple’s statue of the golden *Avalokiteśvara*, alongside the Kingdom of Cambodia’s Great Supreme Patriarch and Phra Phommunee, Deputy Sangharia of Thailand. For details, see <http://www.merit-times.com.tw/NewsPage.aspx?unid=468888> (accessed September 25, 2019).

hosted by Fo Guang Shan Institute of Humanistic Buddhism in November 2019.

Before presenting the key issues and analysis, it is necessary to briefly introduce some general background on why Mahāyāna and Theravāda Buddhism are widely held to be discordant or incompatible with each other, and the long-term disputes between the two, touching on doctrine, *dharma*, religious practices, and the ultimate goal, among other matters. Theravāda Buddhists typically hold strong views of their religious identity, taking their own traditions to be Orthodox Buddhism (Swearer, 2006: 83) and expressing suspicions that various aspects of the Mahāyāna tradition lack authenticity. Some scholars have suggested that, owing to the longstanding lack of communication between these two traditions (Cheng, 2007: 179-181), Theravāda monastics have a broadly negative impression of Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhists, particularly with regard to the latter group's *Vinaya* practices. For instance, Richard Gombrich (1988: 12) noted that Mahāyāna monastics were mistrusted by Theravāda Buddhists for not observing monastic rules strictly. Fieldwork by Gombrich and Obeyesekere, meanwhile, reported that “most Sinhala Buddhists—including most nuns we have spoken to [...] believe that the *bhikṣuṇī-sangha* in Mahāyāna countries is corrupt” (1988: 274). A Sri Lankan nun interviewed by Wei-Yi Cheng said that “Mahāyāna monastics do not observe precepts strictly” (2007: 180); and Hiroko Kawanami found that some nuns in Myanmar “did not relish the possibility of ‘Mahāyāna’ influence on their religious practice, as it was considered that they were lax in discipline” (2007: 238). Additionally, the bodhisattva ideal and path emphasized by many Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhists seem not to be widely approved of by their Theravāda counterparts. According to Wei-Yi Cheng's fieldwork experience in Sri Lanka, Bhikṣuṇī Kusuma, who was recognized in public as “the first *bhikṣuṇī* in contemporary Sri Lanka” (2007: 20), said that those Mahāyāna

Buddhists who practice bodhisattva precepts are not the “original Pāli” or adhering to “original Buddhism” (ibid: 23). Kusuma’s negative opinion of the *bodhisattva* ideal was grounded in a belief that it might distract monastics from spiritual cultivation, due to their involvement with community-based activities; and concluded that the practice of the bodhisattva ideal for enlightenment by those who had not yet achieved Buddhahood was “impractical and negative” (ibid: 25). Similarly, the Burmese monk Sitagu Sayadaw—one of the most famous Buddhist preachers—worked on a range of community projects including water-pump installations and the building of a private hospital, leading some local people to criticize his worldliness (Kawanami, 2009: 218-220). Kawanami has also pointed out that some nuns engaged in “this-worldly” philanthropic matters came to be considered “foreign,” i.e., as having departed from Theravāda tradition (2013: 47-50). Evidently, so long as bodhisattva practice is interpreted to mean this-worldly matters, it is open to criticisms from Theravāda Buddhists<sup>6</sup> of a kind not leveled by their Mahāyāna counterparts. As Cheng points out, “Theravāda Buddhism considers arahantship more practical to aspire to, since one needs numerous rebirths as a Bodhisattva before achieving Buddhahood” (2007: 69).

This suspicion is not reciprocal or symmetrical, however: with many Chinese Mahāyāna adherents expressing admiration and respect for Theravāda followers, due to the latter’s continued strict adherence to the monastic disciplines of fasting after midday

6 That being said, however, not all monastics in the Theravāda tradition pay so little attention to the *bodhisattva* ideal; as Anālayo points out, “the path of the bodhisattva has for a long time been a recognized vocation in the Theravāda tradition” (2013: 128-129). For further details, see for example Anālayo (2013: 129n53) and Ratnayaka (1985: 85-110).



and not touching money.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Theravāda practitioners are often termed *the vehicle of the hearers* by Mahāyāna Buddhists, to reflect the role of the Buddha's early followers who sought to become *Arhats* through hearing and practicing his teachings. However, in the eyes of Mahāyāna polemicists, these hearers are too narrowly focused on individual salvation, as opposed to the path of the *bodhisattva*, which aims at all beings' liberation. Broadly speaking, monastics in the Mahāyāna tradition regard its *dharma* as the great vehicle, in contrast to the lesser vehicle of so-called Hīnayāna<sup>8</sup> Buddhism, which in fact comprises two vehicles: *śrāvakas* and *Pratyeka-Buddha*.<sup>9</sup> From the Mahāyāna perspective, Hīnayāna Buddhists focus only on self-saving and enlightenment, and this conflicts with the spirit of the bodhisattva, who strives to save and benefit all sentient beings everywhere (Wang, 2005: 172n2). In Chinese Buddhist scriptures, the *dharma* of the great vehicle in the Mahāyāna tradition is often praised, whereas *śrāvakas* and *Pratyeka-Buddha* are often discouraged—as evidenced in one of the 12 vows made by Medicine Buddha:

Fourth Great Vow: I vow that in a future life, when I have attained Supreme Enlightenment, I will set all who follow heretical ways upon the path to Enlightenment. Likewise, I will set those who follow the [Śrāvaka(yāna)]

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- 7 My 2018 fieldwork data indicate that not all Theravāda monastics strictly observe the precept of fasting and not touching money, even though some of my Chinese informants have a strong impression that they do.
- 8 Hīnayāna literally means the lesser vehicle 小乘, a derogatory term used by Mahāyāna Buddhists; see Keown (2003: 107).
- 9 Keown explains the term *Pratyeka-Buddha* 辟支佛 or 是獨覺 as meaning “a private or solitary Buddha, one who remains in seclusion and does not teach the Dharma to others” (2003: 222).

and [Pratyeka-Buddha] ways on the Mahayana Path<sup>10</sup>  
(*Sutra of the Medicine Buddha*)

Similarly, in the *Brahmā's Net Sūtra*, Mahāyāna practitioners are said to transgress minor precepts if they only practice śrāvakas and Pratyeka-Buddha:

8<sup>th</sup> minor precept: My disciples, if you turn away from the eternally abiding scriptures and the code of morality of the Great Vehicle, declaring that these are not Buddhist teachings; and if instead you accept and maintain the wrong views of adherents of the two vehicles or non-Buddhists, along with all of their prohibitions and scriptures and moral discipline based on mistaken views, then you have committed a minor transgression of the precepts.<sup>11</sup>

24<sup>th</sup> minor precept: If, my disciples, you are in possession of the Buddha's scriptures and vinaya, and the Dharma of the Great Vehicle, as well as the correct view, the true nature, and the true Dharma body, but you do not apply yourself in practice [... and if] you furthermore apply yourself to mistaken views, the practices of the two vehicles [...] this is not the practice of the bodhisattva path. If you intentionally do these things, it counts as a minor transgression of the precepts.<sup>12</sup>

34<sup>th</sup> minor precept: My disciples, you should uphold the precepts when walking, standing, sitting and lying down.

10 T14.n450, pp405a18-a20. Quoted from *Sutra of the Medicine Buddha*, translated by Minh Thanh and P. D. Leigh (2001: 20).

11 T24.n1484, pp1005c5-c7. Quoted from *Exposition of The Sutra of Brahma's Net*, translated and edited by A. Charles Muller (2012: 337).

12 T24.n1484, pp1006c19-c23 (Muller: 363).

You should chant these precepts during all the six periods of the day and night [...]. If you give way to even one thought of following the practices of the two vehicles or the non-Buddhists, it constitutes a minor transgression of the precepts.<sup>13</sup> (*Exposition of the Sutra of Brahma's Net*)

According to the Ven. Shih Leguan (釋樂觀 1902-1987), early overseas Chinese monks in Burma never made contact with local Burmese monks who practiced what the former would have termed Hīnayāna Buddhism; and conversely, Burmese monks did not recognize Chinese ones as the Buddha's disciples, or even concede that Chinese Mahāyāna doctrines were a form of Buddhism (1977: 155). Taken together, the modern scholarly literature and Chinese Buddhist scriptures suggest that such prejudices or misperceptions—which persist down to the present day in some circles—are both a cause and a consequence of the lack of cross-traditional understanding and dialogue that can be trace back to the early days of Buddhism.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, the above-mentioned cultural exchange event in 2017 could have represented a critical breakthrough in Mahāyāna-Theravāda communication. Yet, without the proper mutual understanding, this and other similar exchanges could only be “flashes in the pan” as opposed to concrete steps toward union.

### Humanistic Buddhism's Challenges in Present-day Myanmar

This section discusses, in light of the existing literature and

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<sup>13</sup> T24.n1484, pp1007b21-b26 (Muller: 379).

<sup>14</sup> The Second Council, which took place approximately a century after the demise of the Buddha, is thought to have caused the first schism in the Buddhist *saṃgha*, between the *Mahāsāṃghikas* and the *Sthaviras*, who had divergent viewpoints and rule practices (Geiger, 1912: ix; Skilton, 2001: 47). See also Prebish (1974: 239-254).



my most recent ethnographic fieldwork, the difficulties Humanistic Buddhism will likely confront in modern Myanmar. First, however, it should be noted that Humanistic Buddhism in Thailand since the 1960s has featured extensive interaction between Fo Guang Shan Monastery and Thai Buddhism, including the recent construction of Thai Hua Temple in Bangkok; the support of Thailand's late King Bhumibol and Head of all Members of the Sangha (the Supreme Patriarch); and widespread anticipation that the Mahāyāna Buddhist College (大乘佛教學院) will emerge as an international center of Mahāyāna-Theravāda exchange.<sup>15</sup> In short, Thailand's socio-cultural conditions and friendly religious atmosphere have given Chinese Mahāyāna tradition a major opportunity to propagate itself there.

Myanmar's social, political and economic environment is rather different from Thailand's. My fieldwork in Yangon and Mandalay indicated that local Burmese-Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhists' status and development, both past and the present, are very different from those of their counterparts in Thailand. It is thus worth asking whether Humanistic Buddhists have encountered more hardships and obstacles establishing themselves in Burmese, as opposed to Thai, society; and if so, why. The first important point in this regard is about monastic status and identity, as well as social recognition. Though Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism is a minority religion in Thailand, followed by only around 1.5% of the population (Wu, 2017: 171), Chinese monks enjoy equal religious status with local Thai monks, with both groups being treated on an equal footing both by the Thai royal family and the laity in general. In Myanmar, on the other hand, according to some of my informants, Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism has been de-recognized by Myanmar's Department of Religious Affairs, meaning that its

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15 For details, see <http://www.merit-times.com.tw/NewsPage.aspx/NewsPage.aspx?unid=438561> (accessed September 28, 2019).

monks and nuns are not able to obtain monastic identity cards. Lacking the official certificates, moreover, Chinese clergy are denied certain special privileges or benefits that Burmese monastics are granted. Additionally, an informant monk in Shifang Guanyin Si in Yangon told me that any religious activities held by Chinese Buddhists in Myanmar had to be confined to their monasteries, due to intrusive government surveillance that would otherwise ensue.<sup>16</sup> As such, it is also worth paying more attention to the legal aspects of promoting Humanistic Buddhism's ideas and practices, in the absence of the host-country regime's political support and religious recognition.

The second contextual obstacle we should think about is enormously important to the future development of Buddhism via cross-traditional collaboration or even union, for which many Chinese monastics wished even before the seminal cultural exchange of 2017. Nevertheless, the concept of union raises an important question regarding precisely who is interested in it, and whether there is an imbalance in the desire for it across the two traditions. In seeking the answer, it would be facile to suggest that the deep historical antagonism between Mahāyāna and Theravāda schools would be easy to resolve, particularly among those with a conservative Theravāda perspective; and indeed, only Mahāyāna Buddhists from Taiwan or Mainland China have thus far called unilaterally—and thus, unrealistically—for a so-called union in which only they seem to be particularly interested. During the 2017 cultural exchange in Yangon, one Burmese official cordially invited the group of cross-Strait delegates to visit Myanmar frequently, and to guide local people who take the Buddhist faith

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16 While Theravāda Buddhism is recognized and supported by the government, some well-known and powerful monks and monasteries are nevertheless firmly controlled and monitored due to the local regime fearing them as threats to its power.

as their priority and respect monastics. Based on my fieldwork data, this statement seemed suspect to me, as perhaps being mere bureaucratic endorsement of Myanmar's new policy of openness to the world. In contrast to Ven. Leguan's time in the middle decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Burmese did not consider first-generation overseas Chinese monks to be monastics due to differences in their religious lifestyles and practices such as robe color, no fasting after midday, and no alms-begging (1977: 150), I observed some laypeople in Myanmar showing respect to Burmese-Chinese monastics by offering their seats to nuns on the bus, by joining their palms as respectful greetings, or by assisting monks inside Chinese monasteries. In other words, second- and third-generation Burmese Chinese monastics' status—or at any rate, their treatment—has improved considerably over the past half-century or so. Nevertheless, the prejudicial claim that Mahāyāna Buddhism “was not taught by the Buddha” (*dasheng feifo shuo* 大乘非佛說) are deeply rooted in many conservative Burmese monks, including several famous ones, who have severely criticized the Mahāyāna tradition over a lengthy period while preaching to local laypeople based on some of my informants' statements. These monks' criticisms have definitely influenced local people's perceptions of Mahāyāna doctrines and practices (as evidenced, for example, by the fact that Avalokiteshvara is seen as folk deity, instead of bodhisattva). Against this backdrop, it is unsurprising that Myanmar's “educated” laity have been instilled with pro-Theravāda bias, and that Humanistic Buddhism's ideas and practices originating from Mahāyāna tradition have gained scant acceptance among them. Additionally, Myanmar's general monastic atmosphere seems to be anti-Mahāyāna, insofar as that tradition's influence is feared as threatening the “purity” of the Theravāda one. Ling Jiou Mountain (LJM) in northern Taiwan is a typical example of a monastery where the Three Vehicles—i.e., Chinese Buddhism, Vajrayana Buddhism, and Theravāda

Buddhism 三乘—are practiced together.<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, however, the Mahā Kusalā Yāma Monastery, a branch of LJM in Yangon, is said to propagate and preserve the Theravāda tradition only: a clear sign that LJM varies its propagation strategies according to the local ethos and religious context. In short, it is clear Mahāyāna Buddhists will face an uphill battle if they are to successfully to propagate Humanistic Buddhism in Myanmar, given the local people's general lack of interest in it, amounting at worst to total lack of recognition.

Finally, but no less importantly, we must consider Fo Guang Shan Monastery's capability to prepare and deal with social-cultural situations that differ from those of Taiwan. As compared to the two previously mentioned challenges, this third is arguably easier to change. Language—that is, both Mandarin and Burmese—plays a key role in Fo Guang Shan's efforts to localize and to promote Humanistic Buddhism in Myanmar. Broadly speaking, most of the Yunnanese in Myanmar live, and have always lived, in Mandalay, whereas Yangon Chinatown has been shared since colonial times between the Hokkien and the Cantonese Chinese. Owing to regional variation in the degrees of “de-sinicization” and assimilation in postwar Myanmar, there has been a marked division in the use of the Chinese language by these two places' ethnic Chinese (Li, 2015): with Yunnanese Chinese's language proficiency and cultural outlook having been more durable than that of their Hokkien/Cantonese counterparts in the south of the country. Like myself, Yi Li often heard from ethnically Chinese inhabitants of all parts of Myanmar that “the Chinese in Lower Burma, especially the younger ones, can hardly speak the Chinese language properly nowadays, while the language standard in Upper Burma is much higher because they have had good [Chinese] education” (2015:

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17 For details, see the website of Ling Jiou Mountain Monastery, <https://www.093.org.tw/index.aspx> (accessed 30 September 2019).

10). Against this backdrop, it would appear relatively easy to promote Humanistic Buddhism to the Yunnanese community via Mandarin.<sup>18</sup> More importantly, most Yunnanese groups in Myanmar are said to still adhere to Mahāyāna Buddhism, due to their lower degree of acculturation, rather than attending Theravāda activities like Chinese (the Hokkien and the Cantonese groups) of Yangon (Duan, 2015: 58). By the same token, propagating Mahāyāna doctrines to local Burmese and assimilated Hokkien/Cantonese groups is a rather difficult task, not only for outside preachers (such as Fo Guang Shan Buddhists) but also for local Burmese-Chinese monastics. During my fieldwork in 2018, what surprised me most was the inadequacy of my overseas Chinese monastic informants' formal Dharma teaching in the Burmese language,<sup>19</sup> despite most of them being able to communicate with local people or even serve as Burmese-to-Mandarin translators for outside Chinese Buddhist visitors. This apparent disjuncture in their linguistic abilities highlights the fact that preaching Buddhism in Burmese not only requires profound understanding of doctrines and of that language, but also a deep understanding of the Pāli language. While there is already abundant international monastic talent in Fo Guang Shan, the monastery should carefully consider finding and selecting the right monks or nuns to build and localize Humanistic Buddhism in the social-cultural context of Myanmar's "closed" society. In such calculations, anyone seeking to expand Humanistic Buddhism in the Theravāda contexts of Myanmar and Thailand should address

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18 It is worth noting that many Chinese in Asian countries pray to and worship the Buddha among a range of other deities, instead of learning Buddhism's essence and knowledge.

19 So far, only one senior Burmese-Chinese monk (Ven. Mingsi 釋明思), the abbot of Shifang Guanyin Si in Yangon (十方觀音寺), is said to be capable of lecturing on *Dharma* in the Burmese language, because he graduated from Myanmar University.



the triple Mandarin-Burmese-Pāli language barrier head-on, instead of passively expecting non-Chinese laity to learn Chinese as a means of enhancing their understanding of Mahāyāna teachings. Mahā Kusalā Yāma Monastery, a branch of LJM, can serve as a good example here. It has recruited two local monks in Yangon for its educational business and Theravāda matters, even though a Taiwanese nun from LJM headquarters superintends the branch's business, in a clear effort to make its founder's religious mission workable in Myanmar. Thus, language and local-network resources will likely be key factors in Fo Guang Shan's success as it seeks to open up a new field.<sup>20</sup>

### **Potential Opportunities for Humanistic Buddhism in Myanmar**

Despite the multiple current difficulties discussed above, one should not forget that each crisis contains seeds of opportunity. As the well-known Buddhist saying has it, "where there is Dharma, there is a way." Venerable Master Hsing Yun often emphasizes the importance of harmonization between the Mahāyāna and Theravāda traditions via the trend of Humanistic Buddhism:

The ideal being advocated here is to accommodate diversity within commonality, and to seek commonality within diversity. In Buddhism, this means that the [Theravāda] and [Mahāyāna] schools must seek harmony [...]. Harmony is actually the Buddha's teaching of the Middle Path, which represents the true meaning of the Dharma (2012: 11).

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20 Owing to the relatively limited scope of this paper, it will not be possible to discuss the complete challenges and difficulties that Mahāyāna Buddhism may encounter in Myanmar. For example, gender issues such as monks' predominance over nuns are also crucial factors to be explored.

Humanistic Buddhism is an integration of all Buddhist teachings from the time of the Buddha until the present day—whether they are derived from the Theravada, Mahayana, or Esoteric traditions (2018: 6-7).

Following Venerable Master Hsing Yun's consistently expressed ideas, this final section focuses on Humanistic Buddhism's potential opportunities in contemporary Myanmar society. First, it is important to note that charity and education are the key practices that have enhanced the feasibility of Venerable Master Hsing Yun's mission of creating a Mahāyāna-Theravāda exchange union. Philanthropic activities organized by Fo Guang Shan Monastery not only easily resonate with local Myanmar society, but also are avenues of potential collaboration with Theravāda monastic institutions. Simply put, giving donations is an obvious way of exhibiting one's friendliness and goodwill across ethnic and religious boundaries, the positive results of which can be realized quickly. More significantly, however, Myanmar has only just opened its doors to the outside world after around five decades of Army-imposed hibernation, so that all sectors of its economy need to be revived. Most of the country's people, but especially certain ethnic minorities, still suffer the effects of persecution, war and poverty, to the point that they definitely need the outside world's relief supplies and assistance.

Therefore, Myanmar at the present time is an arena in which Humanistic Buddhism practitioners can and should carry out extensive programs of charitable activity. According to my fieldwork data, Burmese-Chinese monastics already interact with Theravāda monastics by sponsoring local charities and medical provision. As such, donation is an important means of allowing Theravāda Buddhism to "catch glimpses of" Chinese Buddhism in operation. In a similar vein, I witnessed Ciguang Si (慈光寺) from Taiwan organize the 6<sup>th</sup> Southeast Asia Sangha Offering Puja

in Yangon in 2018. The abbot of this monastery, Ven. Hui Kong (釋惠空), collaborated with one local Chinese Buddhist nunnery (Luohan Temple) for cross-traditional translation and event assistance, and donated money and offered lunch to more than a thousand monastic students in the Insein Ruama Pariyatti Institute (緬甸仰光巴利文僧伽學院). During this offering event, the dean of this Pāli College, Sayadaw Tiloka Bhivamsa (因聖亞瑪大師) and local Theravāda monks came together with Chinese Buddhists in the Main Hall for Buddhist chanting and mutual conversation via a Burmese-Chinese nun's translation. It felt quite significant to personally witness this event, embodying an increasingly prevalent annual practice of monastics from different traditions communicating with each other respectfully.<sup>21</sup> In light of the above examples, it seems appropriate to suggest that Humanistic Buddhism has the potential to “create its own sky” in Myanmar contexts via offering events and charitable activities, which will showcase its contributions to, and win recognition from, local monastics and laity alike. This, in turn, could lead to virtuous cycles between the local ethos and the Mahāyāna tradition, since the more people accept and recognize Humanistic Buddhism, the better it will spread and develop in Myanmar.

In this final part of my paper, I will focus on education, and in particular, Venerable Master Hsing Yun's proposition that “the propagation of Humanistic Buddhism requires [Buddhists] to proactively reach out to serve people and value education” (2016: 276). In Myanmar as elsewhere—and among the overseas Chinese community, as among other communities—this of course includes education aimed at fostering future monastic talent.

In Myanmar, particularly in rural areas, there is a tradition of

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21 However, it is also worth considering why Mahāyāna Buddhists' offerings to their Theravāda counterparts are a one-way flow; i.e., one seldom hears of any Theravāda group reciprocating such actions.

people receiving secular education inside monasteries. However, this system has taken a wrong turn, insofar as monasteries' taking up of this burden has in effect absolved local governments from establishing schools, or indeed even formulating educational policies of their own. Many Chinese Buddhist monasteries and Theravāda temples I visited in Myanmar during my fieldwork there had a learning center for young monastics (and secular children in some cases) that differed in quality depending on each monastery's financial conditions and educational arrangements. It is worth noting that the majority of the Chinese junior novices in these centers, most of whom came from upper Burma, had left their homes due to civil strife, and drug-related crime (Wu, 2006: 82-89). The lack of motivation to become monastics among the children thus recruited, coupled with the Myanmar custom whereby a monastic may disrobe many times, leads a high percentage of Chinese Buddhists educated in such settings to return to secular life (ibid). And for this reason, there are not enough trained younger monastics to continue the Chinese Mahāyāna lineage in Myanmar, despite many Buddhist monasteries' best efforts to attract and foster them.

The populations of novices at Chinese Buddhist monasteries and nunneries in Myanmar vary in both size and composition, with students as young as seven and as old as 15 receiving some combination of secular and monastic education from their own institutions' senior monastics and outside invited teachers. Several of my informants told me that the key problem Burmese-Chinese monastics have faced is the lack of good organization of such learning programs. Additionally, there is no formal Buddhist monastic college for Chinese Buddhists in the country. In this context, talented adult monks or nuns who are motivated to stay in monastic circles are often sent to Taiwan, Singapore or Mainland China for advanced monastic education, and of these, some never return to Myanmar and/or resume secular lives. Given that the

Chinese Mahāyāna tradition has a minority status in Myanmar, its destiny will be even more perilous if the next generation's well-educated monks and nuns continue to be lost in this way. As Susanne Mrozik (2009: 365) aptly put it, "across the Buddhist world, the status of [monastics] is most directly linked to their levels of education in Buddhist canonical languages, scripture and philosophy." Against this backdrop, Fo Guang Shan Monastery should act swiftly to forge cooperative educational initiatives with local Chinese Buddhist circles, aimed at the future propagation of Humanistic Buddhism in Myanmar. Educational undertakings to foster talent in this monastery are strongly emphasized and valued, and it thus should have no trouble providing material resources such as Mandarin and doctrinal texts, as well as qualified monastic and lay teachers, to such cooperative initiatives. If adopted, this course of action would lay a vital foundation for the currently ill-served junior novices mentioned above, including but not limited to an appropriate knowledge of the Chinese, Burmese and Pāli languages. Fo Guang Shan Buddhist College would also be a highly appropriate venue for these novices' eventual doctrinal study abroad, which would of course include the ideas and practices of Humanistic Buddhism. Subsequently, the return of these talented Burmese-Chinese monastics to Myanmar would not only strengthen Mahāyāna Buddhism there, but also render service to society via Humanistic Buddhism's commitment to the public. And better education, in turn, would tend to improve the status of Chinese monastics in Myanmar, as bilingual monks and nuns could take on the role of propagating Humanistic Buddhism by both verbal preaching and cultural publications in local Theravāda contexts. Perhaps most importantly, some essential Burmese texts—for instance, on meditation or Pāli doctrine—could also be translated into Chinese by these well-trained Burmese-Chinese monastics, thus providing vital and enduring resources for present and future Chinese Mahāyāna practitioners. This approach will



undoubtedly take time and money if it is to bear fruit. However, I find it unrealistic to suppose that Humanistic Buddhism in Myanmar could be firmly built and localized based on charitable activities alone.

## Conclusion

From the early Buddhist era to the present day, antagonism between the Mahāyāna and Theravāda schools has existed, and will not be easy to resolve. In the past few decades, however, an increasing number of religious activities and cultural-exchange events have involved union between practitioners of Mahāyāna and Theravāda Buddhism, to the point that one can cautiously hail a breakthrough in cross-traditional understanding and communication. Against this backdrop, my paper has aimed to paint a broad-brush picture of Humanistic Buddhism's challenges and potential opportunities in Myanmar, based on my latest fieldwork data as well as the relevant prior literature. Despite numerous difficulties, I suggest that charity and education are the key practices that have enhanced the feasibility of Venerable Master Hsing Yun's mission of creating a Mahāyāna-Theravāda exchange union and propagating Humanistic Buddhism in Myanmar.



Humor is the Chan mind of wisdom  
that laughs at self, not others.  
Humor is the speech of wisdom that  
mocks self, not others.

—Humble Table, Wise Fare

