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BOOK REVIEW

The Rise of Tzu Chi: The Making of a Global Buddhist Movement

Chengpang Lee. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2025. 276 pp. CA$34.95; £29.99 (pbk). ISBN 9780774871105

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Chengpang Lee opens *The Rise of Tzu Chi: The Making of a Global Buddhist Movement* with an evocative account of the organization's humanitarian response in Indonesia following the devastating late-2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and earthquake. This narrative hook immediately situates the reader within the vast operational reach of the Compassionate Relief Tzu Chi Foundation, the largest nongovernmental social service organization in Asia and a global "charity superpower" (p. 9).

Lee's 276-page volume is a well-researched account tracing the trajectory of Tzu Chi from its modest origins in 1960s' Taiwan to a global force in disaster relief, medical care, education and environmental protection. The volume begins by offering a description of the life of Cheng Yen (b. 1937), the Buddhist nun whose vision catalyzed the movement. Detailing its institutional birth and growth across eight chapters, Lee provides a comprehensive survey of Tzu Chi's expansive spectrum of charitable works, extending across Taiwan, the People's Republic of China, South-East Asia and the United States.

Unlike previous scholars, Lee argues that focusing solely on the charisma of the founder – which has long been the norm in studies of the movement – is not enough. While recognizing her as a devout Buddhist and talented religious entrepreneur, he chooses to emphasize instead the organizational strategies and methods that enabled her mission to grow, peeling back the complex layers of Cheng Yen's life to invite readers into a more systemic understanding of her charisma. In his view, one should understand her charisma as an ongoing intersubjective process and a negotiated relationship between a leader and her followers (p. 184).

Unlike other charismatic leaders who centralize authority to foster dependency, he argues, Cheng Yen leverages her authority to empower followers toward self-actualization and immediate social action, transforming personal devotion into institutional mobilization. Somewhat surprisingly, then, the important question of Cheng Yen's religious lineage and succession is discussed only in passing. Lee observes laconically that her successor will be a "purely religious leader" (p. 197).

A few other aspects of Cheng Yen's own religious background are also left rather vague, for instance with the use of the ambiguous formulations like "she had been exposed to Japanese Buddhist thoughts" (p. 60). Although Tzu Chi is not a traditional Buddhist organization, it still articulates its ideals in terms of Buddhist beliefs and worldview, though with its own set of emphases. And, in many ways, the cult of personality that has coalesced around Cheng Yen gives her a role more akin to the founder of a Japanese new religion than a leader of a traditional Chinese Buddhist association. Ultimately, Lee seems confident that the organization will continue to flourish even after its founder's departure.

Lee shows us how Tzu Chi works as a complex, highly diverse global organization. In order to account for its success, he convincingly analyses structural and organizational factors, specifically drawing upon the concept of strategic capacity developed by sociologist Marshall Ganz. The book

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contains numerous charts, graphs and administrative blueprints detailing the networking strategies and bureaucratic workings of the movement. These, at times, may feel a bit overwhelming to readers looking for more insight into the religious life of Tzu Chi's members. For instance, what is the exact nature and role of "volunteering" in the context of what Robert P. Weller et al. (*Religion and Charity: The Social Life of Goodness in Chinese Societies,* Cambridge University Press, 2017) call the "industrialized religious philanthropy" of Tzu Chi?

The overarching portrait of the organization that emerges from Lee's study is a positive one. That said, like all successful religious movements that grow into global institutions, Tzu Chi has faced its share of public scrutiny and controversy over the decades. For instance, it was accused of owning "too much land," with reports valuing Tzu Chi's holdings in Greater Taipei alone at US$1.27 billion in 2015. Heated debates then followed, about reforming laws regarding tax exemption for religious groups in Taiwan. After an audit, in 2016 the Foundation appointed a new Board of Directors and CEO, with Master Cheng Yen serving as the Chair of the Board of Directors.

Even readers desiring more explicit analysis will recognize the valuable window this book provides onto an thriving community, its innovative religious leader and its unique history. Scholars of new religions and of modern Buddhism may appreciate the wealth of factual detail and gain a fresh analytical perspective into the organizational aspects of Tzu Chi. Lee's conclusions are backed by extensive fieldwork and an immersive deep dive into the foundation's archival record. Sociologists will be particularly interested in Lee's theoretical engagement with the underlying rationale behind Tzu Chi's extraordinary success over the past half-century.

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