A Sociological Analysis on Environmental Practices of Buddhist Groups in Taiwan

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Abstract

In the 1990s, following the trend of environmental movement in Taiwan, Taiwanese Buddhist groups inspired many environmental appeals, e.g., the mental environmentalism, reserving pure land for the future. Their typical environmental practices are recycling, organic products, simple life, and saving energy etc. In this paper, I will adopt the sociological perspectives to analyze the social implications of these emerging environmental practices of the Buddhist groups and the ways they relate to the environmental movement. In addition to introducing the relation between their religious ideas and environmental ideas and practices, I will apply P. Bourdieu’s framework of field analysis to clarify the social, political, and economic relevance of these environmental practices in the social structure. Different from the philosophical and ethical perspectives, this paper aims to offer an empirical and sociological inquiry on these issues. The preliminary analysis shows that most Buddhist groups adopt personal or light green environmental practices, which maximize the benefits to these Buddhist groups. They are also efficient ways to mobilize members and to obtain profits from these practices. However, the critical and political approaches of environmental practice might impede the religious status of Buddhist groups in the society.

Keyword: religion and environmentalism, Buddhism and environmentalism, Fu Zhi Buddhist Foundation, Dharma Drum Mountain, Tzu Chi Foundation
1. Introduction

Historian Lynn White stated in 1967 that the historical source of contemporary human crisis came from the dualism of the Western Christianity. He turns to the Oriental religion and thoughts as an alternative world view. Since then, the relation between Buddhism and Ecology has become an important issue in the academia circle. Many Western environmentalists treat Buddhism as a “green” religion (Nash 1989; Lin 2003: 477; Lin 2004: 8-10). In Taiwan, many Buddhist groups have started to engage in various environmental practices since the 1990s. For example, Dharma Drum Mountain proposed four dimensions of environmental protection; that is mentality, lifestyle, nature, and etiquette which are based on the purification of mind (Lin 2004; Kao 2008). Fo Guang Shan has also promoted recycling activities since the ceremony for the purification of body, mind, and spirit in 1992. In 1990, Ven. Cheng Yen of Tzu Chi Foundation encouraged members to do environmental practices by their hands, thus launched Tzu Chi’s grand recycle enterprise. In 1992, Tzu Chi also proposed the idea of “Reserving a Pure Land on Earth,” and initiated a series of environmental enterprise (Tzu Chi Foundation 2010). Fu Zhi Buddhist Foundation also found an organic enterprise, Compassion Organic Agriculture Development Foundation, in 1997, and set up Leezen organic chain stores in 1998, which had since become a very popular store of organic products.

There are many scholars concern about the related issues: how can we evaluate the influence of these Buddhist environmental practices on Taiwan’s society and environment? What is the relationship between Buddhist environmental practice and environmental movement? How can we interpret the social meanings of environmental practices of Taiwan’s Buddhist groups? Most of their perspectives are based on philosophy, ethics or classic sutras. They aim to search for clues and evidences of environmental concerns or ethics from historical sutras, and the necessity of environmental practices as part of Buddhist ethics. What kinds of environmental practice confirm to the core values of Buddhism? (Yang, 1994, 1995a, 1995b; Lin 1995a, 1997, 2003) Among them, Chang (1996) and Lin (2004) are a few scholars who bring in social contexts to their discussion. According to Chang (1996), the recycling practices of Tzu Chi Foundation have become a community movement and the possibility of social movement. Lin (2004) adopts an environmental politics perspective and compared the differences of Taiwan’s environmental statements and international environmental statements. He interprets quite well the connection of statements between Taiwan’s Buddhist environmentalism and international environmental statements. These studies provide some highly inspiring viewpoints, but do not demonstrate sufficient information on the multiple dimensions of Taiwan’s environmental practices and its social, political and economic contexts and effects.
This paper aims to review and examine the current studies on Taiwan’s Buddhist environmental statements. I will introduce the Fu Zhi’s environmental practices, and compare them with the practices of Tzu Chi Foundation and Dharma Drum Mountain. Finally, I plan to explore the meanings of social, political and economic contexts of Taiwan’s Buddhist environmental practices from multiple-context perspectives.

2. Characteristics of Taiwan’s Buddhist Environmentalism

Most studies on Taiwan’s Buddhist environmental practices are based on the perspective of philosophy and environmental ethics. Induced by the surge of diverse environmental movements in Taiwan, the proliferation of Taiwan’s Buddhist environmental practices starting in 1990s (Lin 2004; Kuo 2008). They nevertheless fall behind social environmental groups by a decade (Lin 1995b). Lin (2004) points out that the rise of Taiwan’s environmental movement is related to the globalization of environmental proclamations which were introduced to Taiwan by intellectuals. Since then, the academia in Taiwan has launched the discussion on the issue of the relation between religion and environment.

Lin argues that the environmentalism of Dharma Drum Mountain is an extension of humanistic Buddhism and the basis of Buddhist social engagement (Lin 2004: 28). I think this observation is persuasive and could be viewed as the characteristic of Taiwan’s Buddhist environmental practices. It means that Buddhist environmental practices are the extension of the religious practices, rather different from the political-economically approached environmental movement which aims to contest the justice of community and environment. Therefore, the social influences of Buddhist environmental practices have its limitation and are selective.

The Weighing of “Mind” and “Land”

Both Tzu Chi and Dharma Drum Mountain are famous humanistic Buddhist groups in Taiwan, and their environmental practices soon caught social recognition and appreciation. However, Buddhist scholar Yang Huinan launched a series of criticism against such Buddhist environmental practices. He pointed out that either Zhu Chi’s ideal of “Reserving Human Pure Land” or Dharma Drum Mountain’s ideal of “Inner Mind environmentalism” could only work on the purification of people’s “mind” rather than on the real “environment,” which only achieve partial salvation (salvation for particular groups) but general salvation (salvation for the general) . Furthermore, this typical Buddhist practices thus evade the criticism of the capitalists and the government, who are the two main pollution producers. Yang suggests three factors that contribute to the lack of political-economic criticism in Taiwan’s Buddhist environmental practices: first, the conservative political ideology and attitudes of Buddhist leaders; second, the
capitalists, who are destroying ecology and producing pollution, are the main donators to these Buddhist groups; third, it is the promotion of the idea of inner-world contributes to ignoring the importance of outer-world the and the conservation of main stream Buddhist groups in Taiwan (Yang 1994: 32-49). Therefore, Yang contends that right Buddhist environmental practices should join the critiques of political and economic structure, for it is the main source of environmental issues. He praises the standpoints of Ven. Chuang Dao, the abbot of Tainan Miaoxin Monastery, who argues that Buddhists should criticize the unethical policies of capitalists and the government. Yang thinks that this is the right way to fulfill environmental “general salvation”, better than the practices of “treatment only to the pains” (Yang 1994: 50).

Ven. Chuang Dao funded the filming of *The Outcry of Pureland* to record the event of the environmental protests, while involved in Houjing’s anti-chemical- factory protest movement in 1980s. In addition, he wrote articles to appeal to the Buddhist groups to establish the Environmental Life Protection Foundation, to push the professionals’ involvement in the policy-making, and to boycott environmental unfriendly products (Lin 1997). He also asked Buddhists to vote for the legislative candidates who have strong environmental ideals (Chuang Dao 1995: 12-13). His political-economic criticism approach is in stark contrast to Zhi Chi’s principle of non-involvement in politics. However, Ven. Chuang Dao’s ideas of environmental protection do not gain significant support from Buddhists (except of scholars) and social media, quite contrary to the warm welcome and responses to the inner-worldly environmental practices. It seems that Ven. Chuang Dao has failed to encourage Buddhists to follow the critical approach of environmental movement in Taiwan. Yang concluded that this is a “hard way” to conduct Buddhist environmental practices (Yang 1994: 50).

Yang further explains that the main reason for Taiwan’s Buddhism to be conservative in the environmental issues can be traced to their interpretation and preference in Buddhist doctrines. Thus, he reinterpreted the statement that “the purification in mind bringing the purification in land” in *Vimalakirti Nirdesa Sutra* to support the political and economic critical environmental practices in Buddhism. However, his contention led to a heated debate (Lu 1995; Yang 1994, 1995a, 1995b; Lin 1995a; Lin 2004). This debate involved the issues of how to define the meanings of environmental concerns and practice from Buddhist scriptures? And, for the Buddhists, whether environmental practice is a convenient way in pursuit of blessings and wisdoms or a necessary practice toward a full liberation (Lin 1995a:182)? I think that the conservative environmental discourses and practices of Taiwan’s Buddhist groups reflect the position of these groups in Taiwan’s social structure, and their non-critical standpoints would prove to their best advantage.

**The Social Impact of Taiwan’s Buddhist Environmental Practice**
Different from the philosophical perspective, Chang (1995) and Lin (2004) emphasize the social effectiveness of Buddhist environmental practices. Quite contrary to Yang’s viewpoints, Chang argues that individual recycling practices of Zhu Chi could be upgraded to be a community activity. Volunteers of Zhu Chi have constructed an invisible Zhu Chi community, which is beyond the boundaries of geography, ethnicity, and class, and its activities have the function of quasi-social movements and reforming the society smoothly. The reform comes from grassroots, which may bring important meanings to social order and structure, just like a silent social movement (Chang 1995:67-97). It seems that Chang tries to salvage the social influences of Zhu Chi recycle practice, and argue that the environmental practice induced by purifying inner mind could also purify this-worldly environment through the social networking.

From a global-local perspective, Lin (2004: 1-46) explores the interrelationship among Taiwan’s Buddhist environmentalism discourse, globalization of environmentalism discourse, and Taiwan’s environmental movement. Taken Fagushan’s environmental practice as an example, Lin shrewdly points out that the environmental practice of Taiwan’s Buddhism has certain important social implications. Compared with the politically critical environmental movement in the 1990s, Dharma Drum Mountain’s environmental discourse and practice shows a way for the Humanist Buddhism to engage in social activities and a route toward Buddhist modernization. However, they tend to support rather than criticize government’s policies and only favor soft way of environmental practices. Thus they were able to attract social appreciation, to ascertain a good social image, and to consolidate the collective identity of their followers (Lin 2004:25-28). I think that personal environmental practices in everyday life have many important latent functions to these Buddhist groups, even though that may not be proclaimed by the Buddhist discourse. To reach a balance of the enhancement of both Buddhism and social status is the basic strategy in their choice of environmental practices. Thus if certain kind of environmental practice would cause the loss of social support, Buddhist groups would not devote to this practice.

3. The Linkage of Production and Consumption: the practices of Fu Zhi Buddhist Foundation

Fu Zhi Buddhist Foundation is an organization with strong relation to Tibetan Buddhism. One of the important practices of this group is to study The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment: the Lamrim Chemo as the crucial basic guide to liberation. There are probably more than 300 study groups in Taiwan. Because of the low-key style of the founder, Ven. R-Chang (1929-2004), Fu Zhi Buddhist Foundation does not like to use modern media (Chen 1999; Schak 2007:214-215), thus Fu Zhi is less well known in Taiwan ten years ago. However, they have been thinking and working on environmental practices earlier than the other two groups. Since 1994, Fu Zhi Foundation has begun promoting and educating people
on the non-pesticide organic agriculture. They established the first organic non-pesticide farm in 1995. In 1997, they were granted the license to establish Chi Xin Organic Agriculture Foundation. Their purposes are, first, to promote physical/psychological health toward a satisfactory life; second, to restore the earth strength and to enrich the offspring; and third, to promote Chi-Xin enterprise and to establish a sincere society. Since then, Fu Zhi has actively and gradually promoted organic non-pesticide cultivation, the procession, certification, examination of the products, the training of personnel, and to set up demonstration farms (Chen 1999). They also run many organic and vegetarian restaurants around Taiwan. Since 1998, they have set up 73 branches of Leezen Center. Until the end of 2008, Till now, Chi Xin has certified 204 organic or pre-organic producers (Chi Xin Foundation 2009: 5-6). Chi Xin has become a popular organic produce chain store in Taiwan. To connect the organic production to green consumption could be regarded as an environmental practice that has both mind and land simultaneously. According to my observation, Ven. R-Chang’s concerns to the pollution and environmental crises relates to his first-hand experience of environmental movement during his many years sojourn in the US. When some followers were ill due to pesticide poisoned food, he realizess if we do not change the way of agriculture production, then our health cannot be sustained. How can we have a healthy body for liberation? In addition, being kind to the land and all life beings by not using pesticide farming conforms to the Buddhist value of compassion and the doctrine of no killing. It also can prevent farmers from the harm of pesticide as well as beneficial to consumers’ health (Chen 1999 and Schak 2007: 213-214).

The organic environmental practices adopted by Fu Zhi are quite different from that of Zhu Chi and Dharma Drum Mountain. Compared with Zhu Chi recycle enterprise, Fu Zhi’s Chi Xin Foundation not only attains profits from its business, its enterprise can also establish an efficient connection between production and consumption. Their collective movement has produced the environmental effects beyond the boundary of Buddhist groups. They have established one workable environment-friendly land use and an efficient chain of green consumption. Not only do the students of the class of The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment: the Lamrim Chemo become regular consumers, but has also attracted many citizens to be patrons and thus reaches out to become a community-based chain store. For environmental protection, Fu Zhi’s environmental practice has its depth and breadth in terms of its efficiency. They seem to have surpassed the environmental efficiency of Tzu Chi’s recycle business. In addition, Fu Zhi applies their Buddhist compassion and life protection to the morale of environmental protection as their core values and purposes. In this perspective, their aims are quite similar to Tzu-Chi and Dharma Drum Mountain, which shy away from the aspects of political-economic criticism, but has provided the necessity of Buddhist doctrines for their environmental practices.
4. The Perspectives of Multi-Social Contexts

All together, Taiwan Buddhist has shown that the practices of environmental protection are diverse and even heterogeneous. Lin (2004:26) points out, on the one hand, that the heterogeneity of Taiwan’s practice of environmental protection might have been caused by the lack of systematic and consistent perspective of nature and, on the other hand, by the result of the lack of central decision-making system in Buddhism and thus led to their competition for social resources. I think this argument is not sufficient to explain why Taiwan’s Buddhist “hard way” environmental practices do not become popular? Rather, the “easy way” of emphasizing mind purification and neglecting environmental protection has become the main practice. On the whole, Buddhist practices of environmental protection, either radical or conservative, are all religion-based or based on the religious priority. The Buddhist environmental practices tend to be a convenient way for liberation.

I believe, in order to understand its social meanings of Taiwan’s Buddhist practice of environmental protection, it is necessary to analyze them in the general social context. By adopting the easy way of the practice of environmental protection, these groups not only have to take them as an extension of religious practice, but also have to mobilize their followers, consolidate their group identity, and enhance their social prestige, even as a way to recruit new members and raise funds, and to bring in profits (such as recycle stuffs). On the contrary, if they adopt the difficult way of political/economic criticism, it is rather different from ordinary Buddhist practice and world view, and unable to distinguish themselves from other environmental groups. In addition, they could not highlight their Buddhist characters and do not confirm to the expectation of the society and their followers, and might bring in negative effect on their social supports and resource mobilization. Therefore, Taiwan’s Buddhist practices of environmental protection have not only conformed to the ideas of Buddhist groups, but also take the various benefits from the practices into account.

In Bourdieu’s (1991: 1-44) field analysis, there are many viewpoints that can be applied to the analysis of Taiwan’s Buddhist practices of environmental protection:

(1) Religious capital is the reproduction of natural and supernatural world, and its norm is the initiative foundation of consistent thoughts, feelings, and actions. Further, in objective situations, religious capital must adapt to the principles of political views in the social world.

(2) In certain periods, religious capital relies on the structural situation of the objective relationship between religious demands and religious supplies. All kinds of applicants produce and supply the function of their religious capital according to their position in the objective power structure.
Culture, symbol, and economy are different but can be transformed in the power format, and their models of accumulation and function are different. Field is the arena where different capital forms produced, invested and accumulated (Swartz 1996: 78).

In the analysis of social aspects, easy ways of environmental practices have two benefits: internal solidarity and external social prestige and social benefits. Many scholars have mentioned that various environmental practices help to consolidate religious group, enhance group identity, but there are few studies on the social resources that these practices may bring. Taking the Tzu Chi’s recycle as an example, tarting in 1990s, Ven. Cheng Yen, by the invitation of Wu Chuensheng Culture and Education Foundation, began her series talks around Taiwan and called for the ideas of environmental protection for cherishing blessings, saving things, recreating resources. She also encouraged people “to do environmental protection by using the hands that applaud.” After the talks, a lady, one of her followers, began to promote resource recycling and sold what she collected and donated them in the name of “Tsu Chi fellow.” Since then, Tsu Chi has begun its recycle enterprise and profitable business (Chen 1992:48-49) “Reserving Pure Land on Earth” started a series of programs on beautified society (Lu 1992), to promote enhancement of people’s mind, families, and the society in a period of three months. These activities were appraised by Global Views Magazine as the largest mass movement in Taiwan in 1991. Tsu Chi expanded their members by 800 thousands in one year (Chen 1992: 48). Thus the practice of environmental protection promoted by Tsu Chi has effectively enhanced its social prestige and successfully acquires more social resources and recruits more new members. It appears that that Buddhist groups have a great cooperation with large enterprises. The above analysis also applies to the case of Dharma Drum Mountain.

In the analysis of political aspect, those environmental movements that embrace political participation and political criticism are the “hard way” for Taiwan’s Buddhist groups. The humanist Buddhist groups take the route of environmentalism, the doctrine of no political involvement, let alone the activities of mass protests. From the viewpoint of field analysis, Taiwan’s Buddhist mainstream practices of environmental protection evades the environmental movements, which involved interest conflicts, instead, they choose the individual environmental practice, and stay political-neutral in their discourses and support the government’s environmental policies. In doing so, they could stay away from the political confrontations and conflicts. Therefore, the de-politicization of Buddhist groups’ discourses did not mean that they have nothing to do with politics. We are able to notice the delicate connection between these groups and politics in the interaction among these groups, society, the government, and the business community. To be exact, using a hidden way to come close to or not contradict the ideology of the ruling class might have been the consideration, either
intentional or not intentional, for the best interest for these groups.

In the analysis of economic aspect, only a few researchers noticed that resource recycle could bring in huge economic benefits to the Buddhist groups. Ven. Cheng Yen has noted the seriousness of garbage problem in Taiwan and called for the members to do recycle, and turn the garbage into gold, and has attracted some responses (Lu 1992). Chang points out the benefits from recycle in his interview that the income for recycle in one local area is about 7,000 USD and a total of 7 million in Taiwan each month (Chang 1995: 92). Recently Tzu Chi are making environmental friendly blankets from recycled PET bottles, and selling various environmental friendly products. These businesses have become their important financial resources. Foguangshan also benefits a lot from the recycle business. In his 2010 speech about “Environmental protection and mind protection,” Ven. Hsin Yun urged his followers to do “garbage sorting, resource recycle.” He said that the recycled resources not only could reduce the environmental pollution, it could also turn garbage into gold. The founding endowment of Fo Guang University and one local monastery in central Taiwan were funded by its followers’ volunteering working on collecting recycling stuffs. I think that the easy and non-critical way of environmental practices bring various benefits to Buddhist groups. It is a practical way to combine personal merit collect and group interests, not only mobilizing a great deal of volunteers efficiently, but also create large amount of financial support.

5. Conclusion

This paper aims to explore the issues of Taiwan’s Buddhist environmental practice. Most of Buddhist environmental practices belong to environment-friendly daily life practices. However, the relationship between Buddhist practice and environmental protection is not so straight. During the recent decade, the issue of Buddhist animal release has attracted public attention for it has result in various impact on the ecological system (Chen 2010: 101-143). Another recent controversial case concerns a construction project of Tzu Chi’s Ecological Park in Neihu wetlands triggered a confrontation between environmentalists, neighbors, and Tzu Chi (Environmental information center 2010). This case reminds us the complexity of the issue between Buddhism and environmental movements, and the environmental issues are inevitably involved with political and economic interests.

I think that the full explanation of why Taiwan mainstream Buddhist groups chose the easy way of focusing on “mind” rather than on “land,” we have to analyze this issue by placing Taiwan’s Buddhist environmental practices on the general social structure. Why Tzu Chi is doing on environmental protection, but is confronting with other environmental groups for the development of Tzu Chi’s Ecological Park in Neihu wetlands at the same time? (Chen
2010: 101-143) Why some groups are doing environmental protection on the one hand, but are doing small-scale animal releases on the other? (Chen 2010: 101-143) It seems that there are many possible connections between Buddhism and environmental protection. From the primary observation of the events of Taiwan’s Buddhist groups, a simple dichotomy cannot fully grasp the complexity of Buddhism and environmental protection. To fully elaborate the multiplicity and complexity of this matter, one may have to employ the multiple-dimensional structural analysis.

References
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