Purifying the Multitude

> Yet why is Shakyamuni Buddha only found inside the monasteries or mountain forests instead of in families and society? The only path to the righteous faith is for all Buddhists to establish their faith in the founder – the great Buddha.
>
> Stemming from such thoughts, I therefore vowed to bring Buddhism out of the mountains and into society, to ensure that monastics interact with lay Buddhists, and to take Buddhism from temples into homes. I also pledged to shift a faith which focused on meaningless metaphysical discussions to one that is devoted to serving society. It is also vital to alter Buddhism's focus on monastic cultivations of chanting, meditation, and reciting Buddha's name to being open to all Buddhists for collective cultivation, fellowship and interchange.[1]
>
> Hsing Yun

> A Fo Guang Shan Buddhist should not be like a solitary flower in love with its own fragrance.[2]
>
> Hsing Yun

One of the key tenets of *renjian* Buddhism from its inception was to make the Buddhist teachings relevant for the modern world. For Hsing Yun, Buddhism is not to be practiced by monastics in secluded mountain caves but has to be brought into society and into the homes of everyday people. The two quotes from Hsing Yun both illustrate the importance of communality in Fo Guang Shan *renjian* Buddhist religiosity. While the previous two chapters have shed light on Fo Guang Shan's many social engagements in the fields of culture, charity, and education, this chapter takes seriously the religious dimension in *renjian* Buddhist religiosity and therefore examines how overseas Fo Guang Shan Buddhists practice their tradition on an intrinsically religious level. Much like the order's involvement in culture, education, and charity, religious cultivation at Fo Guang Shan is meant to be yet another form of social engagement. Regardless of whether they convey a sense of Chineseness to the overseas community, contribute to the temple's host society through civic engagement, or take part in Buddhist cultivation, Fo Guang Shan Buddhists practice their religion as part of a group. When it comes to Buddhist doctrine, practice, and cosmology, Fo Guang Shan is deeply rooted in the mainstream Chinese Mahayana tradition. Fo Guang Shan's particular approach to *renjian* Buddhism is to promote these doctrines and practices by enhancing their accessibility and applicability for ordinary members of society. To achieve this goal, Fo Guang Shan emphasizes the importance of a communal approach to the religious practice of the Buddhist tradition.

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1 Hsing Yun, *Humanistic Buddhism*, p. 326.

2 Original in Chinese. "佛光人不能孤芳自賞", quoted from Shi Manyi 釋滿義, *Xingyun moshi de renjian fojiao* 星雲模式的人間佛教, Taipei: Tianxia wenhua, 2005, p. 231.

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The Religious Ecology of Fo Guang Shan

Fo Guang Shan is in many ways a typical order in the Chinese Mahayana tradition. The nuns and monks of the order wear the customary robe of Chinese monastics. The daily schedule of a Fo Guang Shan temple is structured around morning and evening services, where excerpts of the standard Chinese Mahayana scriptures are chanted. Dharma assemblies, followed by Buddha's name recitation and Chan meditation, are the most popular forms of religious cultivation practiced by the order's adherents. As a *renjian* Buddhist order, however, Fo Guang Shan puts a special emphasis on making Buddhist teachings and practices relevant to contemporary society. Over the years, Fo Guang Shan has proclaimed several sets of directives that together constitute the religious philosophy (*zongmen sixiang* 宗門思想) of the order.[3] The Spirit of Fo Guang Shan (*foguang ren de jingshen* 佛光人的精神), for example, describes the ideal spirit of Fo Guang Shan adherents. Its four points all stress the importance of altruism and putting the community before the individual.[4] Other directives too consist of practical instructions; the Future Direction of Fo Guang Shan (*foguang daochang fazhan de fangxiang* 佛光道場發展方向) contains four goals: (1) harmony between modernity and tradition; (2) equality between monastics and laity; (3) the equal importance of wisdom and practice; and (4) the promotion of Buddhism through the arts and humanities.[5] The second set, the Four Guidelines of Fo Guang Shan, constitutes one of the order's best known group of directives. The Four Guidelines are also reflected in the structure of this study. They declare cultural activities, education, charity, and religious cultivation as the order's four main fields of engagement.[6] Hsing Yun first set out these directives when he founded Fo Guang Shan in 1967. It is also the only group of directives mentioned on the global English language webpage of the order.[7] Another set, the Core Ideas of Fo Guang Shan (*Foguang shan de linian* 佛光山的理念), calls for attributing honour to the Buddha, attributing achievements to the multitude,

3 Foguangshan zongwu weiyuanhui (ed.), *Foguangshan kaishan sishi zhounian jinian tekan*, vol. 1, pp. 12–13.

4 "佛教第一，自己第二 Buddhism comes before me; 常住第一，自己第二 The monastery comes before me; 大眾第一，自己第二 The multitude comes before me; 信徒第一，自己第二 Devotees come before me". Semicolons added by the author. Foguangshan zongwu weiyuanhui (ed.), *Foguangshan kaishan sishi zhounian jinian tekan*, vol. 1, pp. 12–13.

5 "傳統與現代融合", "僧眾與信眾共有", "修持於慈解並重", "佛教與藝文合一".

6 Foguangshan zongwu weiyuanhui (ed.), *Foguangshan kaishan sishi zhounian jinian tekan*, vol. 1, p. 13.

7 https://www.fgs.org.tw/en/#.

attributing benefits to the monastery, and attributing merit to the devotees.[8] It expresses the ideal mind-set of a Fo Guang Shan adherent. Based on this mind-set, the Characteristics of Fo Guang Shan (*Foguang shan de xingge* 佛光山的性格) lists eight codes of behaviour recommended for Fo Guang Shan adherents. The eight codes are: be humanistic and joyful, emphasize teamwork and harmony, educate through the arts and humanities, resolve problems like a Bodhisattva, be compassionate, skilfully render service to others, respect people of different nationalities, and focus on universality and equality.[9]

The directives above were published as a complete set on the occasion of the order's 40th anniversary as part of a ten-volume publication. But they are not the only ones to have been published by the order. In fact, over time Fo Guang Shan has developed a variety of directives and maxims. On its global Chinese language webpage, for example, Fo Guang Shan provides a slightly different set. The Characteristics, Core Ideas, and Future Direction are missing, while three more sets are provided instead: the Religious Style of Fo Guang Shan (*Foguang shan de zongfeng* 佛光山的宗風); the Fo Guang Shan Tenets (*Foguang shan de xintiao* 佛光演的信條); and the Objectives of Fo Guang Shan (*Foguang shan de mubiao* 佛光山的目標).[10] Like the directives previously discussed, most of these are very practical nature. Of the total of eight points that together comprise the religious style of Fo Guang Shan, for example, only the first directly refers to Chinese Mahayana doctrine, and even then only in passing. It calls on Fo Guang Shan monastics and laity to spread the eight traditional schools of Chinese Buddhism together. The following seven, like the tenets and objectives, emphasize the modernist world-affirming and socially-engaged character of the tradition.

Fo Guang Shan's directives are thus not doctrinal abstractions but rather are meant to be put into practice. They stress the importance of culture and education in spreading the Dharma, claim the equality of the sangha and the laity at Fo Guang Shan, profess the merging of modern and traditional elements for the enhancement of Buddhism, and put a very strong emphasis on ethical behaviour and altruism. They are designed to make Buddhism serviceable to contemporary society and help the individual to become part of a harmonious group.

8 "光榮歸於佛陀," "成就歸於大眾," "利益歸於常住," "功德歸於檀那." Foguangshan zongwu weiyuanhui (ed.), *Foguangshan kaishan sishi zhounian jinian tekan*, vol. 1, pp. 12–13.

9 "人間的喜樂性格; 大眾的融合性格", "藝文的教化性格", "菩薩的發心性格", "慈悲的根本性格", "方便的行事性格", "國際的共尊性格", "普世的平等性格", Foguangshan zongwu weiyuanhui (ed.), *Foguangshan kaishan sishi zhounian jinian tekan*, pp. 12–13.

10 Fo Guang Shan, introduction, https://www.fgs.org.tw/introduction.aspx. English translations provided by the author.

Not surprisingly, the language that is chosen therefore stresses accessibility and applicability. Instead of using complex Buddhist terminology or directly referring to Buddhist sutras or doctrine, most directives are meant to provide clear and applicable guidelines for the disciple's behaviour.

During my fieldwork, it was yet another set of directives, the Three Acts of Goodness (*sanhao* 三好; "do good deeds, speak good words, think good thoughts" *zuo haoshi, shuo haohua, cun haoxin* 做好事, 說好話, 存好心) that came up most often. Not only are the Three Acts of Goodness to be found on most of the order's websites and social media, they are also physically inscribed in many places, such as on the Hsing Yun statue at the Ancestral Da Jue Temple in Yixing. In addition, they were also often quoted during my interviews and during the many informal conversations I had with Fo Guang Shan Buddhists. Some of the elderly female volunteers at the temples in particular stated that they appreciated the simple wording and applicability of the Three Acts of Goodness. Following a similar line of reasoning, one of the leading YAD members at Hsi Lai Temple noted during an interview:

> One of our biggest activities over the year is the summer camp for children. We invite children from six to ten to participate. We run activities with them and teach them knowledge and skills that are strongly related to Humanistic Buddhism. But they have to be able to understand. Therefore, we teach things such as our Three Acts of Goodness. That is easier to understand for them than impermanence or causes and conditions.
>
> (Interview with the President of YAD; conversation conducted in English; Hsi Lai Temple, Los Angeles, USA; spring 2018)

This quote demonstrates how the simple wording of doctrine at Fo Guang Shan is intended to enhance the accessibility and applicability of Buddhist thought to people of all backgrounds. The Buddhism taught at Fo Guang Shan temples is supposed to help modern day Buddhists to act in harmony with the communities they are a part of, be it the family, the temple, the workplace, or the whole of society. In contrast to many modern Buddhist religiosities that have developed in the West and that express a strong emphasis on individuality, Fo Guang Shan's *renjian* Buddhists see Buddhism as a tool to create harmony between themselves and the group.[11] For them it is the "traditional Buddhism" of the past with its ideal of practicing in the solitude of the mountains that is overly individualistic. The modernization of Buddhism intended to move temples into urban centres and make Buddhism relevant for our contemporary times. For *renjian* Buddhists, modernity, communality, and religious cultivation are inextricably entwined.

11 On modern Western Buddhism and individualism, see D. L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 195–199.

Buddhism at Fo Guang Shan is presented in a way that makes it approachable and convenient. Volunteers at Fo Guang Shan temples are welcoming and kind. The temples are bright and colourful and the meditation halls are equipped with air-conditioning. This accessibility is further enhanced by the simple wording of the order's maxims and directives. They can be easily understood and applied by Buddhists in Taiwan as well as overseas. Fo Guang Shan is of course not the only Taiwanese Buddhist order that uses easily understandable everyday language to express its main directives. Other Buddhist orders such as Dharma Drum promote similarly understandable and applicable maxims.[12] However, while Dharma Drum Mountain's founder Sheng Yen (*Shengyan* 聖嚴) has also published academic books and articles, Hsing Yun's strength lies particularly in his ability to popularize the Buddhist Dharma. Fo Guang Shan's *renjian* Buddhism is to be understood and practiced with ease in daily life by people of all backgrounds. To achieve this goal, the order provides many ways to engage in religious cultivation.

According to Fo Guang Shan, Buddhism is not to be practiced by monastics in the solitude of a secluded mountain monastery but rather has to move into the urban spaces of modern society, where it can be practiced by monastics and laity together. Fo Guang Shan Buddhists can therefore choose from a broad range of religious practices to engage in. Most forms of cultivation at Fo Guang Shan are communal practices that take place in a group setting. Since the order is a highly centralized organization, all practices and proceedings are standardized and follow the same format. Thus, wherever on the globe a disciple steps into a Fo Guang Shan facility, they will have a similar experience. For example, most Dharma assemblies at Fo Guang Shan temples worldwide have been adjusted to suit the contemporary lifestyle of today's lay Buddhists. Instead of following the lunar calendar as is customary, most activities take place at the weekend. Ritual procedures are standardized and follow a standard chanting guide. The recitation language at almost all temples is Mandarin.[13] Most rituals last about two hours, though on some occasions more elaborate rituals are conducted that can spread over days.

As is generally the case in the Chinese Mahayana, the most popular forms of religious cultivation at Fo Guang Shan are practices in the customary Chinese Buddhist ritual format of the Dharma assembly (*fahui* 法會). These practices include the regular morning and evening services, different Dharma assemblies

12 Dharma Drum, About, http://www.dharmadrum.org/content/about/about2.aspx?sn=46.

13 With the exception of Hsi Lai Temple, where chanting at Dharma assemblies is occasionally conducted in English. During my fieldwork I was told that at Zu Lai Temple (*Rulai Si* 如來寺) in Brazil, the chanting is occasionally conducted in Portuguese.

based on particular texts, as well as repentance ceremonies.[14] In addition to these long-established ceremonies, Fo Guang Shan has also developed new rituals such as the Baby Blessing Ceremony (*Foguang baobao zhufu li* 佛光寶寶祝福禮) or the Ceremony of Light and Peace. Other practices held at Fo Guang Shan facilities are the one-day Eight Precepts Retreat (*ba guan zhaijie* 八關齋戒), short-term monastic programmes such as the English language Fo Guang Shan Tsung Lin University's 2-Month Monastic Program or the International Youth Seminar on Life and Ch'an (*guoji qingnian shengming chanxue ying* 國際青年生命禪學營), the sutra study and book clubs, sutra copying (*chaojing* 抄經), and the spectacular Chan and Pure Land Dual Practice Blessing Dharma Assembly (*Chanjing gongxiu–qifu fahui* 禪淨共修－祈福法會), a massive combination of dharma assembly, light show, and stage performance held in huge sports arenas in Taiwan.[15] In addition, other popular forms of Chinese Buddhist cultivation, such as the recitation of Buddha Amitabha's name (*nianfo* 念佛) and Chan meditation (*chanxiu* 禪修) can of course also be practiced at Fo Guang Shan. At most temples, Fo Guang Shan Buddhists are invited to come to the temple for a weekly group meditation or recitation (*chanzuo/nianfo gongxiu* 禪坐/念佛共修) or to participate in longer retreats.

Most of these modes of religious cultivation are not exclusively practiced at Fo Guang Shan (although some, such as the Baby Blessing Ceremony, are); the majority are adopted from the common pool of religious practices associated with the Chinese Mahayana. However, the order's size, manpower, and ability to organize large-scale events enable it to provide the full range of practices, even outside of Taiwan. At Hsi Lai, for example, there are numerous activities held on most days of the week that cover almost the full range of Fo Guang Shan's religious practices and ceremonies. Though slightly less busy, the situation is similar at Nan Hua in Bronkhorstspruit. Despite its rural location, there is always something going on at the temple. Regular activities held at Nan Hua include weekly communal cultivation, bi-weekly meditation classes, and bi-annual large-scale Dharma assemblies.

14 M. Günzel, *Die Morgen- und Abendliturgie der chinesischen Buddhisten*, Göttingen: Seminar für Indologie und Buddhismuskunde, 1994; D. Gildow, "The Chinese Buddhist Ritual Field: Common Public Rituals in PRC Monasteries Today", *Journal of Chinese Buddhist Studies* 27 (2014), pp. 59–127.

15 For a list of Dharma assemblies at Hsi Lai Temple, see for example http://www.hsilai.org/tc/cal/df.php. For the Chan and Pure Land Dual Practice performed in Kaohsiung during my fieldwork in February 2017, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vyr6O9ho57A.

Modernist Buddhist Communalism and its Western Other

Communality constitutes an important element of religious cultivation as practiced at Fo Guang Shan. In fact, Hsing Yun argues that practicing in a group is more effective than engaging in cultivation in solitude. He states:

> The difference between solitary and communal cultivation lies in the following: If one practices alone, one's powers are limited. It is just like hitting someone with one finger does not hurt. Communal practice on the other hand is like making a fist, it creates a strong force. By igniting one piece of wood, one only creates a small flame, but if one ignites a whole of pile of wood, one creates a blazing fire. Communal cultivation enhances the practice of every single practitioner.[16]

The institutional framework for communal practice at Fo Guang Shan is the BLIA. Next to the monastic order, the BLIA is at the organizational centre of Fo Guang Shan. By joining the organization, people become integrated into the Fo Guang Shan system. In addition, the BLIA also provides instructions for the conduct for its members. There are many detailed guidelines for BLIA members advising them how to act, how to pray, how to speak, how to organize meetings, what to wear during those meetings, and so on.[17] These rules and regulations ensure the smooth operation of Fo Guang Shan's many undertakings, many of which require the manpower of BLIA members. BLIA members come to the temple not only for religious practice in the narrowest sense but also to volunteer. In fact, as with the civic engagements and cultural endeavours described in the two previous chapters, volunteering at Fo Guang Shan is understood as a form of religious cultivation. For Fo Guang Shan Buddhists, the workspace of the volunteer constitutes a space for Buddhist practice, even more than the meditation hall. In the social setting of a volunteer unit the adherent can practice mental flexibility, equanimity, and compassion, all of which are necessary for developing a practical realization of the Buddhist Dharma. There are many opportunities to serve as a volunteer at a Fo Guang Shan temple besides welcoming visitors and taking care of the shrine halls. Hsi Lai, for example, operates a publishing house, book shop, welcome centre, dining hall, teahouse, a variety of schools for the young, an orchestra, funeral services and columbarium for the ashes of the deceased.

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16 "自修與共修的不同，在於一個人修行，力量有限，好比用一根手指頭打人不痛，共修就如五根手指握成一個拳頭，可以產生力量。用火點燃一根木材，火力有限，好多的木材就能產生熊熊的火焰，共修可以助長彼此修行的力量." Hsing Yun, "Di shisi jiang. Jihui gongxiu" 第十四講. 集會共修. http://www.masterhsingyun.org/article/article.jsp?index=13&item=16&bookid=2c907d494c10e2f0014cefa6ce570032&ch=14&se=0&f=1.

17 Hsing Yun, *The Buddha's Light Philosophy*, Hacienda Heights, CA: Buddha's Light Publishing, 2010, chapter 10.

All these endeavours require manpower and support from the laity. While the situation is similar at almost all Fo Guang Shan temples worldwide, it is important to note that the situation in the PRC is slightly different. The very strict regulation of religion by the state prevents the BLIA from operating in the country. Nevertheless, although the BLIA as an institution is not active on the mainland, a big temple complex such as Da Jue Temple does of course engage numerous lay volunteers in order to deal with the many tasks that occur every day.

Fo Guang Shan has also developed its own phraseology (*yongyu* 用語) over time. When seeing each other, most Chinese Buddhists fold their hands in front of their chest and call on the Buddha Amitabha (*Amituofo* 阿彌陀佛) as a customary greeting.[18] While this was also common practice for Fo Guang Shan Buddhists in the early days of the order, they have now developed their own mode of greeting. When seeing each other they form a mudra with their hand by touching the thumb with their ring finger and say "*jixiang*" (吉祥), which is the Chinese term for lucky or auspicious.[19] Most people I have asked regarding the reason for this change told me that "*Amituofo*" sounds too religious and is too related to Chinese funeral culture.[20] It may therefore sound off-putting to non-Buddhists who visit the temple. However, one monastic also noted that these changes can be seen as an early attempt to build a new school of Buddhism. Other big Taiwanese *renjian* Buddhist groups such as Tzu Chi and Dharma Drum Mountain already established new Buddhist schools (*zong* 宗) in the early 2000s.[21] The monastic I talked to noted that Fo Guang Shan, too, might develop into a school and establishing a particular phraseology constitutes a key element in this process. However, he was also quick to add that it would be for future generations to fully realize this goal.

All of the above elements, the communal approach to Buddhist cultivation, standardization of cultivation practices and proceedings, membership of the BLIA, as well as the development of a new phraseology facilitate a strong group identity. Fo Guang Shan Buddhists often refer to themselves not just as Buddhists, but as Fo Guang People. A well-developed group identity that transcends national origins is a key ingredient of the success of Fo Guang Shan's *renjian* Buddhist religiosity

18 Chinese translation of the name of the Buddha Amitabha.

19 According to Fo Guang Shan, the lotus mudra *Lianhua shouyin* 蓮花手印 symbolizes selfless acceptance, boundless welcoming, supreme reception, unobstructed exchange, and untainted tranquillity.

20 Many Chinese recite the Buddha Amitabha's name to gain rebirth in his Western Paradise. It is particularly advisable to do recitations at the moment of death.

21 See J. Yu, "Revisiting the Notion of Zong: Contextualizing the Dharma Drum Lineage of Modern Chan Buddhism", *Chung-Hwa Buddhist Journal* 26 (2013), pp. 1–39.

overseas. Particularly for first generation migrants, the Fo Guang Shan community and temple space provide comfort and security, but also an ongoing connection to their culture of origin. Although some minor adaptations may be made to specific local circumstances (e.g., at Hsi Lai Temple visitors are not requested to take off their shoes when entering the main shrine), due to a high degree of standardization, Fo Guang Shan's *renjian* Buddhist religiosity is practiced in the same way at all of the order's temples worldwide. The ethnographic report in the following section attempts to further illustrate how religious cultivation and communal practice are entwined at Fo Guang Shan's overseas temples.

The following section presents an ethnographic report of a regional BLIA meeting, the 2017 BLIA World Headquarters Africa Fellowship Meeting. The BLIA meeting took place at Nan Hua Temple and was combined with an Emperor Liang Dharma Assembly (*Lianghuang fahui* 梁皇法會). Repentance rituals such as the Emperor Liang Dharma Assembly constitute a key practice of Chinese Buddhism that linked the monastic sangha and laity and the Chinese Mahayana with wider Chinese society long before the development of modern *renjian* Buddhism.[22] Today, repentance rituals continue to be among the most popular forms of religious cultivation at Fo Guang Shan. At Nan Hua Temple, the Emperor Liang Dharma Assembly is held twice a year, once in the fall and again in the spring around the time of the Qingming Festival (*qingming jie* 清明節), when Chinese families visit the tombs of the deceased in order to clean the gravesites, pray to their ancestors, and make ritual offerings. The Emperor Liang Dharma Assembly takes about one week. In the fall of 2017, it began on a Tuesday and ended on the following Sunday evening. The repentance ritual was temporarily suspended for the whole of Saturday and Sunday morning, so that the 2017 BLIA World Headquarters Africa Fellowship Meeting could be held. On most occasions the Emperor Liang Dharma assembly ends with a Yogacara Flaming Mouth Dharma Assembly (*Yuqie yankou fahui* 瑜伽焰口法會). This time, however, to ensure enough time for the BLIA Africa Meeting, the repentance was instead completed by a triple communal recitation of the Amitabha sutra (*san shi nianfo* 三時念佛), which was conducted on the last Sunday afternoon.

Tuesday is arrival day.[23] A steady stream of cars carrying Chinese South Africans with Taiwanese, PRC, and in smaller numbers, Hong Kong and Southeast Asian backgrounds arrive at the temple. Most of the cars are full-size executive

22 D. W. Chappell, "Repentance and Confession", in: R. E. Buswell (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, New York: Macmillan, 2004, p. 723; Welch, *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism*, p. 188.

23 The following ethnographic report is based on fieldwork data collected at Nan Hua Temple in the fall of 2017.

models or SUVs, many of them produced by German car manufacturers. Participants register at the front desk and settle into one of the bungalows in Nan Hua village, which are all booked out for the occasion. Most of the bungalows have two bedrooms, and so two people are having to share one room to accommodate the large number of participants. In addition to those living in South Africa, a VIP delegation, consisting of a group of lay people and monastics from Australia and Taiwan, has flown in from overseas. They are being accommodated at the main guest house. The participation of the VIP visitors shows the connectedness and interaction between the different Fo Guang Shan overseas temples. Stronger centres such as the temples in Australia support weaker centres in the periphery.

As at most other Fo Guang Shan overseas activities discussed in this book, the majority of participants are middle aged and above. About two thirds are women. The average participation on most days during the week is a hundred plus people, however, on the first evening and last day, participation increases to 200. During the first evening discussion, a monastic asks the participants how many of them are attending the repentance for the first time. 45 persons present raise their hand. However, not all those that attended during the day are attending the first evening session. Some are exhausted after a long day and have retired early. The language spoken during the repentance is Mandarin. Although some of the participants are from the PRC and there is an even smaller group from Hong Kong, the majority originates from Taiwan. The demographics of the repentance reflect the history of Chinese migration to South Africa. Migrants from the PRC tend to be younger and have to work during the week, in contrast to the Taiwanese who moved to South Africa earlier and have by now already reached retirement age. Thus, Taiwanese, although representing a significantly smaller number within the South African Chinese diaspora community and by now even within the BLIA, represent the majority at the ritual. The repentance is a major occasion at the temple and preparations go on for days before the actual start. The dining hall and the main shrine in particular have to be prepared. Many people have donated money to have paper plaques for both living and deceased relatives placed at the main shrine. The merit that is accumulated during the repentance is supposed to benefit those named on the plaques.

Dinner, which in accordance with Chinese Mahayana custom is termed "medicine" (*yaoshi* 藥石), since Buddhist monastic regulations technically prohibit the consumption of food after noon, takes place at 5 p.m. at the dining hall. Since space is limited, the dining hall is reserved for the participants of the Dharma assembly. The regular lodgers of the temple – long-term volunteers, staff, students, teachers, workers and I – eat in one of the classrooms. The monastics and VIPs take their dinner in a separate room next to the dining

hall. At 7 p.m., after finishing dinner, everybody puts on a Chinese ritual gown (*haiqing* 海青) and moves to the main shrine. The shrine hall is packed with about 200 people. Besides me, only one other non-Chinese person is attending the ritual, a coloured South African who is accompanying his ethnic Chinese girlfriend. However, they only participate in the first evening and do not come back.

The actual repentance is due to begin the next morning. This evening a purification ritual is conducted first. The assembly has gathered in the main shrine hall and faces the altar. With the women standing on the left and the men on the right, everybody begins to chant the Dharani of Great Compassion (*dabei zhou* 大悲咒). After a while we begin to circumambulate the rows of the main shrine in a serpentine fashion while continuing to chant in unison. Sometime later, the assembly steps out of the main shrine hall and continues to walk single file in a long line along the inside of the outer walls of the main temple, the men in front and the women following. Monastics are placed at certain points, who sprinkle great compassion water (*dabei shui* 大悲水) on the passing line of participants. By the time the assembly reaches the shrine of the Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha (*dizang dian* 地藏殿) at the rear of the temple, they have already moved on to chant the name of the Buddha Amitabha. Now everybody takes triple refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha (*guiyi* 皈依), chants some more short scriptures, and then the group files back into the main shrine hall, where everybody finally returns to his or her original place. Now it is time for the Dharma talk. The abbot sits on a platform below the big Buddha statues in front of everyone and begins to speak in a solemn voice. He encourages everybody to be strong while facing whatever vexations one may encounter during the following days and to persevere in repentance. Around 10 p.m. the ritual ends and everybody is excused to go to bed.

The next three days follow the same basic structure. The Emperor Liang Repentance Dharma Assembly mainly consists of the recitation of the complete Gold Mountain Emperor Liang Jewel Repentance (*Jinshan yuzhi lianghuang bao chan* 金山御製梁皇寶懺). Monastics are at the front; they play the Dharma instruments and lead the chanting. The lay assembly faces the Buddha statues. Men stand on the right, women on the left. The space in between them is kept free for the abbot and monastics to formally enter and exit the main shrine, and for the abbot to do his prostrations. Since women outnumber men, some women also stand on the right-hand side behind the men. The first row is reserved for the main benefactors. Behind them are the other participants. Almost all participants are wearing their black ritual gowns, which at Fo Guang Shan is worn by all those who have officially taken the triple refuge. Those who have additionally taken the five precepts wear another piece of clothing, the

manyi (曼衣), on top of the *haiqing*. During the day, passers-by sometimes take part in the repentance. They join the last row in their street clothes and participate in the chanting for some time before going on with their days.

In the days that follow, the participants chant while alternately standing, kneeling, or doing prostrations. Every day of the Emperor Liang Dharma Assembly is subdivided into different time slots. Each time slot takes between 50 and 70 minutes and is called a stick of incense in accordance with the time it supposedly takes to burn one incense stick. The first time slot of the day begins at 6 a.m. It is reserved for the morning service which continues until 6:50 a.m. From 7:00 to 7:50 a.m. breakfast is served back at the main guest house. After breakfast, participants have an hour to rest. From 9 to 12 p.m., there are three fifty-minute slots, each followed by a short 10-minute break. During this break participants have the opportunity to eat a cracker, drink some water, or go to the bathroom. Lunch is served from 12 to 12:50 p.m., followed by an hour's rest. In the afternoon, there are three more time slots from 2 to 5:30 p.m. At 6 p.m., after a thirty-minute rest everybody meets for dinner. The evening time slot at Chinese Buddhist retreats is the time that is customarily set aside for the daily Dharma talk. However, this time, instead of a Dharma talk, the senior and high-ranking monastics who have specifically flown in from overseas for the event, use the evenings to promote the Fo Guang Shan book club format.

As mentioned above, the book club format is already a staple of religious cultivation at Hsi Lai Temple. Members of a BLIA chapter meet on a regular basis to read and discuss a text as a group. The text of choice varies and may range from a simple poem or song text written by Hsing Yun to a sophisticated Buddhist scripture. The book club format constitutes a way of studying Fo Guang Shan's *renjian* Buddhism and also encourages people to become involved with the BLIA. At the time of my fieldwork the format is new to South Africa. From 7:30 p.m. to 9 p.m. everybody meets in one of the classrooms. On the first evening, monastics and participants get to know each other, and the atmosphere is relaxed and light-hearted. On the two following evenings, the book club format is introduced and practiced. At the beginning of the second evening, pink papers with a song text written by Hsing Yun are placed on the table in front of each seat. Music is playing in the background. Encouraged by one of the monastics, we begin to sing the song together. On the previous day, a participant had cheekily mentioned that the only book people read nowadays is Facebook. The song serves as an example that one is not required to read a whole book. A simple text such as a song can also be discussed at the book club. After we finish singing, we begin to discuss the content of the song. Key words and key phrases of the song are identified and the participants are asked for their interpretations. The song is about how to act when one encounters

difficulties in life and how those difficulties can be resolved. People share personal stories about the financial problems, visa problems, and other difficulties they had to endure after deciding to emigrate to a new country. On one evening one of the participants relates their conversion story: the husband of the secretary of a local BLIA chapter who had had a gambling problem in the past, has managed to turn his life around since getting involved with Fo Guang Shan. Shortly after 9 p.m., the day draws to a close and everybody goes to bed. This routine is maintained for three days, from Wednesday to Friday.

At the weekend, the 2017 BLIA World Headquarters Africa Fellowship Meeting takes up the whole of Saturday and Sunday morning. Registration begins on Saturday morning after breakfast. Everybody exchanges their black ritual gowns for yellow or maroon BLIA polo shirts and bright yellow BLIA westes. The Meeting begins at 8:30 a.m. sharp. Everybody takes a seat in a conference room next to the dining hall. The participants stand up when the monastics and VIP guests enter the room and take to the stage. Other VIPs and benefactors sit in the front row. The VIPs present include senior and high-ranking monastics, a representative from the Taipei Liaison Office in the Republic of South Africa and several leading lay and monastic members of local and international BLIA chapters. Amongst the lay VIPs are the presidents of the local BLIA chapters, several Taiwanese and Taiwanese South African entrepreneurs, one Taiwanese-Australian industrialist from overseas, and a successful businesswoman and former Member of Parliament of Taiwanese descent. Some of the lay VIPs also serve as lay Dharma teachers and will give lectures during the meeting. The occasion begins, as is customary at Fo Guang Shan, with everyone standing up and singing the "Homage to the Triple Gem". After the song, participants bow to the triple gem and a welcoming speech given by a very senior and high-ranking nun is shown on a video screen. The speech is followed by more words of welcome from the abbot, as well as some of the senior monastics and BLIA lay representatives.

The following day and a half is filled with lectures with titles such as "Faith in Humanistic Buddhism" (*renjian fojiao de xinyang* 人間佛教的信仰), "Ways Our Chapters Can Flourish" (*fazhan foguang de miao jinnang* 發展佛光會的妙錦囊), "Dharma Lecture Demonstration" (*nanfei bujiao shifan*, 南非布教示範), or "Forum: Turning Points" (*shengming de zhuanwanzhu luntan* 生命的轉彎處- 論壇).[24] The goal of the talks is to generate a sense of inspiration. The lay dharma lecturers present personal stories of how they came in contact with Fo Guang Shan and the Buddhist Dharma and how it helped them to, as one lecturer put it, come to a "correct outlook on life" (*zhengque de rensheng guan* 正確的人生觀), achieve

24 English translations as provided by Fo Guang Shan.

a "successful business" (*chenggong de shiye* 成功的事業), create a "happy family" (*xingfu de jiating* 幸福的家庭), and build an altogether "happy and satisfactory life" (*meiman de rensheng* 美滿的人生). The lay lecturer goes on to report how his businesses had flourished after he became a Buddhist. However, one night there was an accident and his factory burned down. Thankfully, in the end the story took a good turn. Due to a favourable insurance policy he was able to rebuild the factory so that it was even bigger, better, and more modern than before. The story, which he illustrated with an on-screen presentation, relates how the Dharma has helped him to face impermanence and blessed him with success in business. Other talks, such as the "Dharma Lecture Demonstration" are given by monastics in which they present ideas on how to effectively spread the Dharma.

On Saturday afternoon the assembly splits into smaller discussion groups. Three groups are formed to discuss the following issues: "Protection of the environment and the protection of the mind" (*huanbao yu xinbao* 環保與心保); "to inherit and to pass on faith" (*xinyang chuancheng* 信仰傳承); and "localization".[25] The latter topic is discussed by the smallest group and is the only meeting conducted in English, since it is especially designed for the English language BLIA chapter. It is led by three monastics and attended by nine lay followers – one local Chinese, the others black, coloured, and white. A couple of youth group members also attend the meeting. The two other groups, which are also led by monastics, are significantly larger and take place in Mandarin. Each group has 75 minutes to discuss its assigned topic. At the end everybody reunites in the big classroom and a representative of each group presents a summary of the discussion on stage.

On Saturday evening after dinner, the "Fo Guang Night" (*foguang zhi ye* 佛光之夜) is celebrated in the inner courtyard of the guest house. The evening consists of a variety show with each South African BLIA chapter giving a performance in front of the assembly. It ends with a ritual "light offering and prayer (*xiandeng qifu* 獻燈祈福)" where everyone presents a candle to a statue of the Buddha. At 9:30 p.m. everybody retires. The following morning the BLIA meeting continues for two more hours. At 10:30 a.m., the Emperor Liang Repentance Dharma Assembly resumes and by noon is completed and all the paper plaques burned (see Figure 9). After lunch, all the collective merit accumulated by participating in the repentance is ritually transferred to all sentient beings. Finally, a triple communal recitation of the Amitabha sutra, which takes about four hours, completes the whole activity.

25 English translations as provided by Fo Guang Shan.

Figure 9: Closing Ceremony of Triple Communal Recitation of the Amitabha Sutra, Nan Hua Temple, South Africa.

There are several elements that stand out in the ethnographic report about the Emperor Liang Repentance Dharma Assembly. First and foremost is the way religious cultivation is interwoven with involvement in the BLIA. A Dharma assembly is of course itself a communal form of practice, after all it consists of people chanting in a group. However, by weaving the ritual into the structures of the Buddha's Light Association meeting, its communal aspect is greatly enhanced. The constituent parts of the whole event – the repentance ritual during the day, the BLIA book club promotion in the evening, the BLIA Africa meeting on Saturday and the morning of Sunday, and the Fo Guang Night – were, in terms of organization and scheduling, almost inextricably interwoven. Technically a participant could just make an appearance at the repentance and spend the rest of the time in his or her room. But that would be difficult to accomplish, since all activities take place at the same venue and the repentance is only fully completed after the BLIA meeting. In addition, on the first evening, when many people chose to stay in their rooms instead of attending the evening session – probably due to exhaustion after a long day of chanting, kneeling and prostrating – they were kindly yet firmly requested to participate in all the sessions of the programme. The activity as a whole was designed to be a coherent communal experience, communal in a sense that goes beyond just chanting in a group.

Most people did not just participate in the repentance as individuals, but as part of a particular unit, their local BLIA chapter. Similarly, the book club promotion in the evening facilitated engagement with the BLIA much more than a "traditional" Dharma talk would have. At a regular Dharma talk, the audience passively listens to a lecture by a monastic. The book club format on the other hand is more interactive. During the evenings, newcomers had a chance to get to know the group and the different local chapters. BLIA members reported on their chapter's activities and planned how they would conduct book clubs in the future. Participants on the retreat were all encouraged to contribute. The same is even more true of the BLIA meeting on Saturday and Sunday morning. By wearing the same westes and polo shirts, which is a common practice at all BLIA meetings around in the world, people express a strong sense of belonging. This communality was also expressed at the Fo Guang Night, when representatives from each local chapter presented a performance in front of the whole group. Those who had made it above the status of an ordinary BLIA member seemed to identify even more strongly with the group. They also had key roles at the meeting. They served as Dharma teachers on stage, kept the time, and had to contribute in several other ways. Some even jokingly referred to them as "monastics with hair" (*you toufa de chujia ren* 有頭髮的出家人).

A repentance at Fo Guang Shan constitutes a means to reduce negative karma, generate merit, or practice filial piety – which is of course its main function – but it also offers a chance to socialize with like-minded people. The social aspects become particularly important in a diasporic setting. It allows first generation migrants to chat in Mandarin (and occasionally in Taiwanese), eat Chinese vegetarian food together, and meet people with a similar cultural and socioeconomic background. At the book club in the evenings people shared their immigration stories and discussed how Fo Guang Shan's *renjian* Buddhist religiosity helped them to overcome their hardships. While many forms of religious cultivation are conducted in group settings, participation in the BLIA institutionalizes the social aspects of religious cultivation.

While communality constitutes the modernist core of Fo Guang Shan's *renjian* Buddhist religiosity, in the West, modern Buddhism is practiced in a highly individualist fashion. In non-Asian (and particularly Western) settings, Buddhism is almost solely equated with meditation.[26] Therefore it is not surprising that it is the meditation classes at Fo Guang Shan's overseas temples that attract the biggest number of non-Chinese. Fo Guang Shan's overseas temples have adjusted to the situation. Temples located in an urban setting, such as the Berlin Fo Guang Shan

26 McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, p. 183.

temple or Hsi Lai Temple in Los Angeles, often run a weekly meditation group. Others, such as Nan Hua Temple, which due to its rural location is more difficult to reach, regularly run weekend or longer retreats. The backgrounds of the participants of these mediation activities depend, of course, on the particular location of the temple. While participants at Nan Hua are white, coloured, Indian, or black South Africans, classes at Hsi Lai Temple are attended primarily by Americans of European and Central or South American ancestry. What they have in common is that first generation ethnic Chinese migrants tend not to attend meditation activities conducted in the local language. To illustrate this situation, the following section provides an ethnographic report on the meditation retreats held at Nan Hua Temple.

Every fortnight, Nan Hua Temple holds an English language retreat. Most are beginner, but some are advanced level retreats. The beginner retreats are particularly popular and book out months in advance. Each retreat is attended by up to 30 participants. The retreat I am joining this weekend is an advanced retreat. The retreatants are mostly middle-class South Africans whose backgrounds reflect the country's ethnic and cultural diversity. Amongst them are many white South Africans of Dutch origin, the so-called Afrikaners, some so-called coloured South Africans, some Indian South Africans, but also a few from the Zulu speaking black community. Members of the temple's youth group sit at the front desk and help check in the retreatants. Some of the non-Chinese BLIA members serve as volunteers. They welcome new arrivals, give them an introduction to the retreat, and even lead some activities such as the tea meditation or the Qi Gong classes. The Chan meditation and the Dharma talk on the other hand are led by monastics. In most cases the abbot fulfils this role, and since his language skills are excellent, he instructs the participants in English. However, not all monastics are fluent in the language, so the leading monastic who is filling in today is accompanied by a translator, an alumnus of the African Buddhist seminary.

The situation at Nan Hua Temple is somewhat special in that discipline on the retreat is not as strict as at Fo Guang Shan's meditation activities in Taiwan or the US. There are many breaks, and silence is not strictly enforced. One monastic explained to me that to maintain the popularity of the retreat, they had to adapt to the local situation. The retreat timetable is therefore designed with the needs of people who have little or no experience with meditation in mind. Classical sitting meditation is only practiced for one session per day. Other activities at the retreat include meditating fully stretched out on the floor with music in the background and so-called tea meditation. The latter introduces to retreatants the Chinese art of brewing and drinking tea. They sit on their meditation mats with a Chinese tea set and one serving of Taiwanese Oolong tea leaves in front of them,

while the instructor teaches them how to brew and enjoy their tea. Qigong classes, sutra calligraphy, and a temple tour complete the retreat. Meditation retreats at Nan Hua therefore not only provide an opportunity to learn Chan meditation, but also function as a general introduction to Fo Guang Shan and Chinese Buddhist cultural practices for the broader South African public.

The retreat is a typical example of Fo Guang Shan's overseas meditation activities. While at Chinese language meditation retreats and classes, the majority of participants have a Chinese background, at the meditation activities conducted in the local language almost no Chinese participate. And those who do attend are mostly the so-called local Chinese, the descendants of earlier Chinese migrants, who do not speak Mandarin. This stands in stark contrast to all other activities held at the temple. As can be seen from the ethnographic sections in this thesis, the overwhelming majority of participants in Fo Guang Shan's activities are Chinese speakers. After participating in the retreat at Nan Hua, I was curious to know why Chinese speakers did not attend the weekend retreats. I asked one of the long-term volunteers, an elderly Taiwanese lady who lived at the temple, why she or any of the other long-term volunteers never attended. She replied: "The locals are only interested in meditation. They hope to achieve some mystical experience. We are here for a very different reason. We Chinese come to the temple to study Buddhism."[27] Interestingly, I received similar answers to the same question during my fieldwork stays at other Fo Guang Shan overseas temples. The answers imply that ethnic Chinese and non-Asians have different understandings of what constitutes Buddhism. As mentioned above, non-Asian Buddhists tend to completely equate Buddhism with meditation. At the same time, they often prefer individualistic approaches to Buddhist practice. On the other hand, from a *renjian* Buddhist perspective it is particularly a socially engaged and communal Buddhism that does not simply focus on solitary meditation that represents a modern approach to the Dharma. Within the context of Chinese Buddhism, meditation is only one of many religious practices. Chinese Buddhists at Fo Guang Shan meditate too. According to those I interviewed, the majority of retreatants on the annual seven-day retreats held at Nan Hua Temple are ethnic Chinese. The seven-day retreats are not only significantly longer and more demanding, discipline is also strictly enforced. The situation at Hsi Lai Temple is similar: the weekly English language meditation class is a beginner's class, while the Chinese language meditation class is an advanced class.

27 Informal conversation conducted in Chinese, own translation. Bronkhorstspruit, South Africa, Fall 2017.

Thus, we can see that while at Fo Guang Shan overseas temples religious cultivation is able to transcend the particularities of origin of different groups of ethnic Chinese, the same does not apply to non-Chinese. In distinction to the cultural and social engagements discussed in the previous chapters, it is in the field of religious cultivation that two independent tracks have developed. The reason for this lies not so much in linguistic and cultural differences, since those also apply to Fo Guang Shan's other social engagements, but in the different understandings of what constitutes modern Buddhism. The aim of this chapter was to take a serious look at the religious dimension of *renjian* Buddhist religiosity and to show how at Fo Guang Shan religious cultivation and communality are inextricably entwined. Not only is social engagement in the fields of culture, education, and charity perceived as a form of religious practice, as has been discussed in the previous chapters, but religious cultivation itself constitutes a form of social engagement. While Fo Guang Shan in terms of doctrine and cosmology is still deeply embedded in the mainstream Chinese Mahayana, it is this particular entwinement of social engagement, communality, and religious cultivation that constitutes the modernity of Fo Guang Shan's *renjian* Buddhist religiosity. At the same time, this form of modern Buddhist religiosity represents in many ways the opposite of what is associated with modern Buddhism in a non-Asian setting. Thus, while the community-oriented modes of religious cultivation manage to transcend the particularities of a highly diverse and layered Chinese diaspora community, this very communality has caused the emergence of a "second track" of cultivation for non-Chinese.