

The Taiwanese Religious Context

RELIGIOUS TRADITION AND TRANSFORMATION IN TAIWAN

The Taiwanese religious renaissance studied here is mainly a renaissance of Buddhism and Daoism. Despite (or perhaps because of) having received privileged treatment by Taiwan's Nationalist (KMT) government during the 1950s and 1960s, most Christian denominations in Taiwan, which at most only accounted for about 7 percent of the population, seem to be losing practicing members and declining in influence, except among the Taiwanese aborigines, who remain mostly Christian.¹ Today it is large, rapidly growing Buddhist organizations (and to a lesser extent some Daoist temples) that are finding innovative ways of helping the poor and the sick, educating the young, and providing spiritual guidance for middle-class people trying to set priorities for their lives amid the myriad choices presented by a modern consumer society.

However, as we shall demonstrate below, the Buddhist and Daoist beliefs that provide the formal identity of these organizations are thoroughly intertwined with Confucian moral ideals. This involves a modern continuation of a long history of creative transformation of the Buddhist and Daoist traditions. Buddhism, for example, teaches that the best way to live is to "leave one's family" (*chujia*) and to become a monk. At face value this is at odds with Confucian insistence that filial piety is central to a morally good life. Yet despite persisting tensions throughout most

of the past two millennia, orthodox Buddhism and Daoism have generally made peace with the Confucian tradition by incorporating key elements of the latter into their own practices. They not only accepted the centrality of filial piety, at least for those who were not monastics, but also legitimized and reinforced family commitments.

The groups studied here continue this process of adaptation, but in a modern form. They, and the Confucianism they are adapting to, represent changing, modernizing forms of old traditions. These modernizing Buddhist and Daoist groups are indeed helping to modernize Confucianism in such a way as to make it compatible with a modern, democratic political economy. To readers who may have been taught that Confucianism supports hierarchical authoritarianism rather than egalitarian democracy (and therefore constitutes a basis for a clash of civilizations with the Western democratic tradition), it will come as a surprise to see the extent that the groups studied here develop and popularize forms of the Confucian tradition that not only tolerate democracy, but also actively support it.

By this tradition, I do not mean “Confucianism,” a canonical set of fixed doctrines from which clear moral rules can be derived. I refer instead to a broad, flexible way of moral discourse that can be used to discuss current moral dilemmas in the light of long, diverse traditions of Asian scholarship. This “Confucian persuasion” (as Tu Wei-ming calls it) seeks a holistic vision of the world, in which self, community, nature, and the ultimate principles of things are integrated in a mutually interdependent harmony. It aims to achieve this harmony by cultivating certain virtues, certain habits of mind and heart, which are developed through the practice of rituals of social propriety and through study of the reasons behind such rituals. The most important virtues are those that bolster strong family relations, which are seen as based on interdependent, hierarchically structured roles: parent-child, husband-wife, and older-younger sibling. These primary family relationships become a model for all other social relations, for instance, between political authorities and subjects, or employers and employees. Confucian moral discourse assumes that there is no fundamental conflict between the family and wider society. Apparent conflicts should be resolved by cultivating the self to understand one’s familial responsibilities in the broadest possible context.²

This way of thinking about moral order is different from the logic of Western-style liberal philosophy, which is more concerned with protecting the autonomy of individuals than with ensuring the integrity of a so-

cietal whole. Rather than assuming that there are certain virtues that all good persons should strive to cultivate, classical liberalism would allow each person to pursue his or her own version of the good, so long as this does not harm others. The starting point for the liberal imagination is not the family—and especially not the hierarchical, unchosen relationship between children and parents—but the autonomous individual, whose significant relationships are based on voluntary contracts with other autonomous individuals. Liberalism assumes that there are indeed fundamental conflicts between different components of society and seeks to protect individuals by attributing to them inalienable rights. The most basic rights constitute a sphere of privacy, protected from the demands of the state and other public institutions.³

Many Americans believe that the liberal tradition, based on the philosophy of John Locke and enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, is the universal foundation for modernity. As the 2002 National Security Strategy of the United States declared, “The great struggles of the twentieth century between liberty and totalitarianism ended with a decisive victory for the forces of freedom—and a single sustainable model for national success: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise. . . . These values of freedom are right and true for every person in every society.”⁴

If one takes this point of view seriously, one would have to argue that, for Asian societies to successfully modernize, they must replace Confucian ways of thinking with Western liberal ones. Many Asians, including those discussed in this book, disagree. They may accept, even embrace, the idea that individuals should have more autonomy than they had in premodern societies—that they should choose where and with whom they want to live, their lifestyle, their religion, and their form of government. They want economies and governments that increase opportunities for such choices. Yet they are often worried about the insecurity, irresponsibility, and general disorientation that accompany modernization. The Taiwanese people discussed here think that they can enjoy the benefits of modernity while avoiding its liabilities, by creatively adapting Confucian ways of thinking to contemporary conditions.

They are doing this through their participation in newly emerging Buddhist and Daoist associations. On one level these associations seem to fit traditional religious practice into a modern, liberal model. They are less like traditional temples and monasteries, and more like religious denominations in the United States—that is, they are not public institutions that hold sway over people by custom, but private voluntary associa-

tions that people join by consent. But they are also unlike most “Americanized” Buddhist and Daoist associations in the United States (as opposed to those formed by recent immigrants), which seem mostly oriented toward individual enlightenment or spiritual consolation, and do not systematically promote engagement in public life. The Taiwanese associations studied in this book transcend the role of private voluntary association. They aspire not just to provide social fellowship and personal salvation to their members, but to influence society as a whole, to shape the way their society takes care of its sick and vulnerable members, and to influence the way it confronts public problems. The general way in which they want to undertake this shaping is to expand the sense of shared responsibility that, in the Confucian tradition, is supposedly at the basis of good, harmonious family life.

At the same time, in ways that will be discussed in individual chapters, they seek to expand Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist discourse in such a way as to accommodate desires for individual freedom and equality. They discourage blind submission to authority and encourage individual initiative. They encourage equality between men and women. They also encourage scientific research and technological innovation. The result is the promotion of social practices that are superficially similar to those of middle-class people in most urban industrial societies around the world, but with different understandings of the moral basis of these practices, understandings that lead to subtle differences.

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

The information used in this book comes from a combination of participant observation, interviews with leaders and followers, and archival research conducted on four religious organizations that have become popular among Taiwan’s emerging middle classes. If I had had more time and resources, I could have made a case for considering other groups.⁵ But these four organizations could be widely recognized as important and influential examples of popular middle-class religious engagement. I was aided in my research by two outstanding Taiwanese assistants, Kuo Ya-yu and Ho Hua-chin. I conducted my interviews in Mandarin Chinese, which is officially the national language of Taiwan. My two assistants were native speakers of Taiwanese (Hoklo or *Minnan yu*), the preferred idiom of most native Taiwanese, which compensated for my own lack of fluency.

Three of the four religious organizations are Buddhist: Tzu Chi, whose

headquarters are in the city of Hualien; Buddha's Light Mountain, headquartered near Kaohsiung; and Dharma Drum Mountain, headquartered near Taipei. All of these organizations have branches not only in other parts of Taiwan, but also in other parts of the world. These are three of the largest and best-known organizations that have become popular among Taiwan's middle classes since the 1980s, when Taiwan began to make its transition to democracy. I gratefully acknowledge the advice of the distinguished sociologist Hsin-huang Michael Hsiao in selecting them. To these three Buddhist organizations, I added a case study of a Daoist association in Taipei, Enacting Heaven Temple (Hsing Tien Kung), which is also very popular among the urban middle classes and is well known for its efforts to build a public library, hospital, and university.

These four groups share several common characteristics. On a superficial level, they have all developed extensive organizations of laypeople (in addition to the core of monks, nuns, and priests), accumulated extensive financial assets (in some cases reaching the billions of dollars), made sophisticated use of the media (books, magazines, videos, and websites), and share doctrines and practices that come from a common wrestling with the dilemmas of Taiwan's modernization.

On a deeper level, another common characteristic that all of these groups share is at least partially demythologized traditional beliefs. That is, instead of taking these beliefs as a solid, literal representation of a world beyond the one of ordinary experience, they see their beliefs as symbolic expressions of the challenges of common human life. Reminiscent of the quest of the Protestant theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer for a "religionless Christianity,"⁶ some of the members of these Taiwanese organizations describe their faith as non-religious. There is much talk about "cultivating behavior" (*xiu xing*), a term well known from books on Confucian philosophy, but one that I had never heard much in ordinary conversation until I became engaged with these groups. The term refers to the process of spiritual development that enables one to understand how to apply them in the broadest possible contexts. Each of the groups' numerous multimedia publications aim to facilitate this understanding.

The norms of filial piety, for instance, have to be adapted to a world of high-tech occupations in which, to be successful, children have to learn to think critically for themselves, and may eventually have to move far away from their parents. The religious groups that I have studied all say that one should still hold on to the principle of filial piety under these circumstances, but that one must understand it in a deeper way and exercise it using new methods. To be truly filial, one must not blindly obey

one's parents, but thoughtfully assimilate the lessons they have taught and carry on their legacy in a cosmopolitan world that they may no longer be able to comprehend.⁷ The collective work of these religious groups is an example of how to do this. They devote themselves to reworking the lessons that Taiwanese parents typically impart to their children and encourage followers to help strangers in need as a grown child would help his or her own parents. For example, those living far from home can fulfill filial duties by generously caring for another's parents—and in the process gain confidence that other members of the religious community will be on hand to take good care of their own parents. Self-cultivation, then, is not just improvement of one's individual self (the "small self"—*xiao wo*), but a broadening of vision that generates affiliations to a wider community (the "big self"—*da wo*).

Another common characteristic of the groups studied here is a devaluation of ritual. Though all of them still regularly practice rituals, they all claim to subordinate external ritual practice to internalized morality. Along with a devaluation of ritual comes a dilution of hierarchy. In their formal structure they remain authoritarian, not democratic. The dharma master in the Buddhist organizations is a supreme leader whose decisions are final. The priests of Enacting Heaven Temple have unchallenged authority in interpretations of ritual and practice. But if rituals led by Buddhist monks or nuns, or by Daoist priests, are no longer as important as the good intentions harbored in a well-cultivated heart, then laypeople can be just as important as ordained masters. All of the organizations studied here have created dynamic associations of lay followers that have rapidly expanded and are carrying out much of the public work of the organization. One secret of the success of these lay associations is that their members are encouraged to take initiative. Even though formal hierarchy remains, its power is diluted by, as well as disseminated through, the active initiatives of the lay associations.

A final common characteristic of all these groups is the rationalization of their organizations. Events in all of the Buddhist organizations run on extremely precise schedules. Even Enacting Heaven Temple seems more orderly than most Daoist temples, and its foundation offices, with their neatly attired professional staff working at banks of computers, seem a very model of rational efficiency.

Yet these organizations are not bureaucratic. "We are not an apparatus," says a Tzu Chi commissioner. "People don't come to work every day. So everybody has to know what has to be done and how to fit in." Authority is not passed down from top to bottom through layers of spe-

cialized offices. Since these organizations depend so much on volunteers, they have to elicit their goodwill, not enact their obedience, and rely on their general skills rather than any specialized training. The religious organizations do this by putting great effort into educating their key volunteers to understand the vision of the organization and to articulate this to each other. A key part of the vision is that work should be carried out in a self-conscious, disciplined, efficient way, and that members should constantly discuss this with one another and encourage one another to act accordingly.

RELIGION AND MIDDLE-CLASS STATUS DIFFERENCES

All of the previously mentioned characteristics fit well with the experiences of mobile middle classes. But the emerging middle classes of Taiwan—and for that matter, of most of modernizing East Asia—are not unified social groupings. They have a number of different segments, and in Taiwan they are also divided by ethnicity. The four organizations discussed here represent the wide range (though not necessarily the full range) of middle-class segments in Taiwan.

By reputation, these four religious organizations correspond to different fractions of Taiwan's middle class. There was considerable consensus among my interviewees about the following distinctions: Enacting Heaven Temple is the most downscale of the four. It is most attractive to shopkeepers, clerical workers, and retail clerks. Buddha's Light Mountain attracts fairly affluent business owners as well as government officials and politicians. Tzu Chi has especially strong attraction to people in modern managerial and service professions. Dharma Drum Mountain has special appeal to intellectuals.

Survey data, however, indicates that actual membership is more fluid than these imputed distinctions.⁸ Yet the distinctions made in popular discourse provide a good map to the complexities of Taiwan's emerging middle classes. Their prosperity has arisen from a number of different sources: globalized technology, which is heavily dependent on research and development; small-scale, entrepreneurial manufacturing, which is networked with counterparts throughout greater China; government patronage (especially connected with the KMT); and local service industries. People whose path to success stems from different sources usually acquire different ways of thinking and feeling that leads them toward different religious affiliations.⁹

Middle-class Taiwanese utilize the distinctions in reputation of the different religious groups to provide a map of relative social status, and individuals try to celebrate or enhance their status by moving between different religious groups.¹⁰ Religious affiliations intersect with and reinforce status distinctions created by consumer advertising.

Besides providing a map of different status stemming from occupation and education, the distinctions commonly made between the different religious groups also provide a map of the ethnic divisions that intersect class divisions in Taiwan. Enacting Heaven Temple is thoroughly Taiwanese. Its ceremonies and sermons are all in the Taiwanese language and its practices remain rooted in the folk customs of Taiwanese village life. Tzu Chi is also Taiwanese—its founder is Taiwanese, the language most commonly used in its ceremonies is Taiwanese, and many of its followers take great pride in saying that Tzu Chi represents the best in Taiwanese culture—but a more refined and cosmopolitan Taiwanese identity than that associated with Enacting Heaven Temple. Buddha's Light Mountain is Mainlander.¹¹ Its founder was from the mainland and has been associated with Mainlander political factions in the KMT. Dharma Drum Mountain is also Mainlander.

With the exception of Enacting Heaven Temple, whose membership is almost entirely Taiwanese, however, the religious groups have become quite mixed ethnically. Although neither Hsing Yun of Buddha's Light Mountain nor Sheng Yen of Dharma Drum Mountain speak Taiwanese, many of their associates do. Their dharma talks are often given half in Mandarin, half in Taiwanese. Participants in their rituals are a mixture of Taiwanese and Mainlander in rough proportion to the mixture in the general population (with perhaps a slight over-representation of Mainlanders). Master Cheng Yen of Tzu Chi speaks both Taiwanese and Mandarin (some interviewees told me that her Mandarin has improved significantly in recent years), and in recent years there have been increasing numbers of Mainlanders participating in the organization, some in high positions.

This gap between what the four organizations *represent* and what they *are* is of great importance sociologically and politically. Taiwan's rapid economic development has produced a middle class full of conflicts. Meanwhile, the island's delicate geopolitical position and conflicted history sets up potentially devastating conflicts between Mainlanders and native Taiwanese. The differences between popular religious organizations could provide a frame of reference for thinking about such social and political divisions. When this happens in other societies, religious

groups can become the agents of violent social polarization. But this has not happened in Taiwan. The groups that I have described have encouraged the blending of different segments of the population and facilitated reconciliation between potentially warring factions. This undoubtedly has helped Taiwan make a relatively peaceful transition to democracy since the end of martial law in 1987.¹²

Though these groups reflect divisions of class and ethnicity, they do so in a way that has kept differences among these interests from becoming antagonistic. To understand how this has happened, we need to consider how the historical development of these organizations has intersected with the particular political history of Taiwan and with the general forces of globalization.

Each of the following chapters in this book thus offers a description of how different segments within Taiwan's middle classes are creatively adapting traditional Asian moral discourse to make sense out of modern conditions. I hope that they give the reader some sense of the flexibility and adaptability of these traditions, as well as some understanding of why these particular forms of revival and adaptation have been taking place in Taiwan and how they are different from movements originating in other parts of Asia. The cases are presented in such a way as to highlight the contributions of these movements to Taiwan's transition to democracy.

To assess these contributions, we need to take a broader look at the sociopolitical history of Taiwan in the late twentieth century.

THE TAIWAN CONTEXT

There is much more to contemporary Taiwanese culture, of course, than Buddhism, Daoism, and creative adaptations of Confucian traditions. Besides a rich and varied folk religious tradition, there are all sorts of practices and values derived from the West. Politicians invoke the ideals of Western liberalism—human rights, democratic competition.¹³ Social scientists use the latest economic and “rational choice” theories for political analysis. Entrepreneurs espouse the need for minimally regulated competition. The advertising industry promotes an incessant competition for status within an ever-expanding consumer society. Taiwanese nationalists celebrate the rough-hewn, somewhat belligerent ethos of native Taiwanese culture. Immigrants from mainland China speak of the glories of a common Chinese heritage. In the midst of all these contending voices,

all of these pushes and pulls, it is difficult to isolate the exact influence of the middle-class Buddhist and Daoist associations studied here. However, one can plausibly argue that these groups have, at the least, helped Taiwan avoid the kind of religious conflict that has aborted democratic transitions elsewhere, and, at the most, have contributed to the stock of social capital—bonds of trust and capacities for civic cooperation—that is commonly assumed to be the basis of a sustainable democracy.

The Taiwanese trajectory has been full of surprises. When I first arrived in Taiwan in 1968, the island hardly seemed to be a likely candidate for a democratic transition. At the time, the country was under the dictatorial rule of the Nationalist Party (KMT) led by Chiang Kai-shek. The KMT government had assumed control over Taiwan in 1945, following fifty years of colonial rule by Japan. To secure their power, they ruthlessly suppressed the local Taiwanese intellectual and political elite through a “white terror” of widespread killing and imprisonment. When the KMT lost the civil war with the Chinese communists in 1949, many of its leaders and soldiers subsequently fled to Taiwan, with the hope of using the island as a base for a counterattack. In the early 1950s, under the cold war strategy to contain communism, the United States gave the KMT economic and military support, although it discouraged its leaders from making a major effort to roll back China’s communist regime. In the name of anti-communist struggle, Chiang Kai-shek’s government imposed a martial law that justified dictatorship. The United States government acquiesced in this, sometimes with the rationalization that, because of their “Confucian values,” the people of Taiwan were not suited to democracy.¹⁴

By the early 1970s, however, the government began to lose its grip. Economic development had given rise to an entrepreneurial middle class, which was beginning to become difficult to subject to tight government control. For geopolitical reasons, the United States, Taiwan’s principal international sponsor, began a rapprochement with the Maoist regime in mainland China. Chiang Kai-shek had become increasingly infirm, and eventually died in 1975. Chiang Ching-kuo, his son and successor, opened a small political space for opposition, and non-KMT candidates began to contest local elections. By the late 1970s, a loosely networked political opposition began to emerge and found its voice in the magazine *Formosa* (Meilidao zazhi). The opposition picked up strength because of the sense of national crisis brought about when the United States officially normalized diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in January 1979 and severed its formal ties with Taiwan. Then,

in the infamous Kaohsiung incident of December, 1979, the KMT government crushed the nascent opposition movement and put eight of its key leaders on trial.¹⁵

What appeared to be a defeat for the opposition in the long run turned out to be a victory. The trial of the “Kaohsiung Eight” stirred up public opinion against the KMT’s heavy handed methods. It also provoked concerns from the American human rights lobby, at a time when Taiwan’s government continued to rely heavily on the United States for military support. Pressures mounted on the KMT to relax controls on political dissent. Opposition candidates became increasingly well organized and successful in local elections.¹⁶

The opposition also began to emphasize an explosive new theme: Taiwanese self-determination. They had previously focused on the issue of lack of democratic freedom, and had not directly challenged the notion that Taiwan would someday be reunited with mainland China, ideally on terms favorable to Taiwan. There was widespread, if subterranean, resentment among native-born Taiwanese, who constitute about 85 percent of the total population, over their repressive and exploitative treatment by a KMT government composed of Mainlanders, who had seen Taiwan mainly as a staging ground for an attempt to win back political control over China. It was only after Chiang Ching-kuo assumed power in 1975 that the KMT began to invest more in improving the lives of native Taiwanese and recruiting native Taiwanese into its ranks. But the memories of exploitation continued, and there emerged long-repressed desires to construct an authentically Taiwanese national identity, based upon the Taiwanese dialect and local history and cultural traditions. Besides exposing Taiwan to the danger that the PRC would use force to overcome any possibility of Taiwanese self-determination, this new Taiwanese nationalism threatened to open up deep ethnic divisions within Taiwan’s society.¹⁷

Under Chiang Ching-kuo, the KMT for its part tried to counter the incipient Taiwanese nationalism by co-opting more Taiwanese into the KMT, even making Lee Teng-hui, a Taiwanese of Hakka origin, its vice president. In 1987, an ailing Chiang Ching-kuo lifted martial law, which made possible all manner of voluntary associations, including the formation of rival political parties. The following year Chiang Ching-kuo died and Lee Teng-hui became president of Taiwan’s government.¹⁸

These events brought about a new era for Taiwanese civil society. A rich variety of new associations were born, associations representing every imaginable brand of social, cultural, religious, and political interest. The

main opposition political party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), began to put together a coalition that played an increasingly important role in Taiwan politics. One product of the new democratic freedoms was an intensification of Taiwanese nationalism, although only a minority of the population seemed willing to risk war by calling for outright independence from mainland China.¹⁹

It is precisely during this period that there was an explosion in the size and ambitions of the Buddhist and Daoist organizations studied here. Why Buddhist and Daoist rather than Christian? The answer may lie in the KMT's policies of controlling and stifling Buddhism and Daoism during its first three decades of rule on Taiwan.

Part of the KMT's dictatorship entailed the suppression of religion. Although it did not try to eliminate peasant folk religion, the government imposed strict controls on any kind of Buddhist or Daoist organization that might have the potential to mobilize citizens against the government. The KMT aimed to legitimize itself as a secular, modernizing government. While promoting classic Confucian moral virtues (interpreted so as to justify obedience to authoritarian government), the KMT's public education attempted to make students critical of traditional "superstitions." Meanwhile, the government made it difficult for religious leaders to develop more sophisticated understandings of their practices or to use modern forms of organization to expand their influence.²⁰

A partial exception to this effort to control and suppress was the KMT's policy toward Christianity. Some of its key supporters in the United States were old China missionaries. Unwilling to alienate such supporters, the KMT gave special privileges to Christians. While it refused to allow Buddhists or Daoists to establish universities, for example, it allowed Catholics to establish Fu Ren University and Protestants to establish Tunghai University. During the 1950s and early 1960s, it also used Protestant and Catholic missionaries as conduits for American donations of food and clothing. During that period, the Christian denominations underwent steady growth. With the exception of the Taiwanese Presbyterian Church, which had long been an incubator of Taiwanese nationalism, most Christian organizations, both Protestant and Catholic, either cooperated with or remained neutral toward the KMT's agenda. In retrospect it is not surprising that, when government restrictions on religious association were lifted and sentiments for a Taiwanese national identity (if not for outright independent statehood) were on the rise, the Taiwanese would favor religious organizations that had a greater claim to be indigenous and that had not been privileged during the years of

KMT dictatorship. Meanwhile, most Christian organizations (the Taiwan Presbyterian Church being an important exception) seem to have declined in membership and influence.²¹

The democratization of Taiwan has been by no means a smooth process, and, in spite of impressive, high-tech-driven economic growth during the 1990s, Taiwanese society has often seemed on the verge of chaos. Ethnic politics have been increasingly contentious. A faction of Mainlanders who strongly favored reunification with China broke off from the KMT and formed the New Party, which regularly garnered about 14 percent of the vote (roughly corresponding to the percentage of Mainlanders in Taiwan) in elections. The KMT itself became split between one faction, led by then President Lee Teng-hui, that increasingly pushed toward the greater autonomy of Taiwan and another faction that advocated a more accommodating stance. The DPP was divided into a core group that strongly supported declaring outright independence from China and a more pragmatic group that did not want to push independence to the point that would bring war. Further factionalization and political maneuvering have resulted in two large coalitions, a “pan-blue” coalition, centered on the accommodationist part of the KMT, and a “pan-green” coalition, centered on the DPP.

Politics, meanwhile, have remained incompletely institutionalized. The rules of the game for political contests have continued to change, and informal norms of political conduct remain instable. Vote-buying and other forms of corruption have been prevalent, in the 1990s especially among KMT politicians, who had more resources than the DPP to engage in such misbehavior—but now the DPP is by no means immune to such corruption. Bickering, infighting, and general ineptitude often lead to legislative gridlock.

In 1996, the PRC tried to use crude intimidation—it conducted “missile tests” off the coast of Taiwan—to pressure voters to reject Lee Teng-hui. The move backfired and Lee won handily. In the 2000 presidential elections, the DPP presidential candidate, Chen Shui-bian, won a plurality in a three-way race and assumed the presidency. Of the multiple factors that made his victory possible, one was widespread disgust at the corruption and incompetence of the ruling KMT.²² And one factor in the perception of KMT incompetence was their slow and disorganized response to the 1999 earthquake—an incompetence that was highlighted by the efficiency of Buddhist relief organizations. In public opinion polls taken shortly after the earthquake, only 33 percent agreed that the government’s response had been good. This was in contrast to 95 percent who thought

that Buddhist relief organizations had done a good job. (The only complaint that might have led to the 5 percent disapproval rate was that the Buddhists served only vegetarian food in their relief operations.)

Chen Shui-bian's administration has not gone smoothly, however, and he has had a difficult time passing any significant legislation. Problems have ranged from the economy, which remained mired in recession throughout the first few years of the twenty-first century (although it has since made a sluggish recovery), to hard-line independence advocates within the DPP who have blocked the relatively pragmatic Chen from making significant progress in easing tensions with the PRC.

As perhaps a desperate move to gain enough votes to win reelection in 2004, Chen, in the fall of 2003, held rallies to push for a new constitution, one that would make Taiwan a "normal, complete, great country"—code words for increased national sovereignty. Beijing warned that any such moves would bring "a disaster for Taiwan."

Chen won reelection by less than thirty thousand votes after having survived an assassination attempt—which his opponents claimed that he staged himself in order to gain a sympathy vote. Beijing responded to Chen's reelection with escalated vitriol and increased threats of military action. Chen continued to have a difficult time passing any significant legislation, and in 2006 he was politically crippled by allegations that members of his family had engaged in political corruption.

One sometimes hears Western experts call Taiwan a "dysfunctional democracy," with free elections but no democratic culture that would enable the various parties to coexist cooperatively. By this definition, most societies that have made the transition from authoritarian rule to democracy within the past two decades could probably be called dysfunctional democracies. Taiwanese political culture continues to have many rough edges and the government sometimes teeters on the brink of disaster. However, there is a more optimistic way of looking at this picture. Despite a history of atrocities committed by Mainlanders against the Taiwanese, the legacy of a harshly authoritarian regime, a "Confucian" cultural tradition that many experts have considered incompatible with democratic values, tensions with mainland China, and a lack of political recognition on the global stage, Taiwan has carried out peaceful transitions of power, managed enough order to sustain a vigorous high-tech economy, maintained the high level of education necessary to develop that economy, instituted a progressive universal health care system, supported a free press, and encouraged a high level of artistic and cultural creativity—this is perhaps the true "Taiwan miracle." In some parts of

the world, religion intensifies ethnic conflict, deepens feelings of historical grievance, and turns political causes into crusades. It pours gasoline on the kinds of fires that have afflicted Taiwan. But I will show that just the opposite effect has come from the patterns of religious belief and practice embodied in the four organizations studied here. Their net effect has been to soothe conflict, reconcile differences, and calm political passions. It is too early to tell if they will be sufficient to sustain Taiwan's troubled democracy, but one can make a persuasive argument that without their important contributions, Taiwan's troubles would have been much worse.