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Templeton Lecture Series

Co-sponsored between CURA, the Boston University Center for the Study of Asia, and  
the Department of Anthropology

**Buddhism and its Trust Networks between Taiwan, Malaysia, and the United States**

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**I. Introduction**

Ms. Q's grandfather migrated from Shanghai to Ipoh, Malaysia. She was born in Malacca, and, at the age of seventy-three, had spent her entire life there. She had been attending the sutra chanting session weekly in a temple of Chinese popular religion in downtown Malacca for decades until she became busy with a Buddhist group from Taiwan named Tzu Chi, eight years ago. She has never had family or friends in Taiwan. But four times she has been to the monastery of Tzu Chi in Xiulin village of Hualian on the eastern shore of Taiwan. On her first trip to Taiwan, she brought a lot of cash, pulled together from herself and from her local friends in Malacca, in hope that she could personally submit it to the monastics, especially the master, to support their livelihood. She was surprised to find that the monastics in Hualian make their own living rather than relying on donations (*gongyang*). In recent years, further trips to Taiwan have been prevented by her increasing leg pain. Each day she works as a volunteer at the Tzu Chi Malacca branch, and watches the Tzu Chi TV channel from Taiwan via satellite. For her, the two words Taiwan and Hualian are "like hometown." She said in our interview in 2004, "Everyone treated us like we just returned home, seeing our parents, seeing our brothers and sisters. That's why I kept going back to Taiwan. I want to learn over there [in Hualian] how to do [Tzu Chi]

here [in Malacca], how to love people.”

Ms. Q's religious experience is a narrative of a slice of on-going inter-Asia connections. Across 3,164.09 km, religion – in this case, Buddhism – has tied a third-generation Chinese Malaysian like Ms. Q of the Malacca Town (population 201,405)<sup>i</sup> to a monastery of 800 residents in Xiulin (population 15,273) of Hualian County of Taiwan.<sup>ii</sup> Her “homecoming” feeling towards the fellow Buddhists far away is in stark contrast to her continued impersonal relation to members of the transnational networks: Though she feels that she can recognize the faces of some visitors from Taiwan, she does not recall the personal names and information of people she met in Taiwan. In other words, while feeling strong sentiments and respect for the place and people out there, she very much remains, at best, mere acquaintance to the Tzu Chi members outside of her own local network.

What Ms. Q holds for people out there in the Taiwan network can fit in the category of what Putnam (2000) calls “thin trust” – that kind of trust one has for acquaintances at coffee shops around the corner. But her feelings for the network as a whole, and particularly her practices locally and transnationally, suggest what Putnam (2000) calls “thick trust” – trust for family and friends, especially those in a tightly knit network. In his words, “trustworthiness is the key to generalized reciprocity”; and generalized reciprocity is the “touch stone” of social capital (Putnam 2000: 134-136). Social capital is “assets in social networks,” referring to “social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Lin 2001: 3; Putnam 2000: 19). For building the foundations of democracy and civic engagement, thin trust matters more than thick trust because the former extends beyond the roster of social networks.

The question is, how does one demarcate the networks that can have this asset of social trust? Putnam and Feldstein (2004) write in the introduction to *Better Together* that trust can only arise from long-term relations and in most cases is locally grounded. Their case studies show that trust can only be built upon “bonding” (or exclusive) rather than “bridging” (or inclusive) social capital. Bonding social capital explains trust within existing networks, but it does not explain how a new trust network can be created. How do we explain Ms. Q's strong thin trust for those Taiwanese acquaintances in her inter-Asia network?

This paper attempts to bring in the notion of “spiritual capital” to shed light on the dynamic processes in which religion creates, bolsters, and circumvent trust in the kaleidoscope of social networks. Spiritual capital here refers to assets in religion-facilitated social networks. Facilitating refers to both symbolic systems (e.g. doctrine, concepts) for meaning-making, and pragmatic goods (e.g. a meeting place, a membership directory) for maintenance. Spiritual capital can be material and calculable goods as emphasized by the rational-choice school of social capital theorists: for example, in Lin’s words, “investment in social relations with expected returns (2000: 6), such as upward social mobility. Spiritual capital can also be symbolic goods as emphasized by the Bourdieuan social capital theorists: for example, knowledge and credentials derives from education or from the position of social strata. While a relatively large scope on “religious goods” has been shared between the “religious capital” approach (e.g. Iannaccone 1990; Stark and Finke 2000) and the pioneer of Bourdieuan spiritual capital theory (e.g., Verter 2003), I shall limit my purview to one form of spiritual capital: trust networks.

To understand Ms. Q’s inter-Asia trust network, I will first give a brief introduction to Tzu Chi, followed by a summary of the early development of its New York division, and a more detailed description of the development of the Malacca branch. I then focus on the role of Buddhism in the relation between trust network and the actual reciprocity arising from the trust network, and show how spiritual capital can be exchanged and in competition with other forms of capitals. I will argue: Religion fosters trust networks locally, and, at the same time, bolsters “thin trust” translocally. In other words, religion bonds intra-group and bridges inter-Asia.

## **II. The Tzu Chi Diaspora**

The Buddhist Tzu Chi (*Ciji*) Foundation is a lay Buddhist humanitarian movement that originated in Taiwan in the 1960s under the monastic leadership of the Venerable Cheng Yen (*Zhengyan*), a three-time nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize. The movement claims ten million members in over 100 countries.

The first overseas branch, Tzu Chi United States (*Fojiao Ciji Jijinhui Meiguo Fenhui*; its official name in English is the Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation, United States), obtained legal status in California in 1985 and, in 1990, established its chapter house, the Still Thoughts Hall. In

the ensuing ten years, Tzu Chi devotees in other countries opened their own branches. As of 5 May 2010, Tzu Chi has a total of 63 branches in Taiwan, and a total of 165 overseas branches: 61 in Asia (including Middle East), 78 in America, nine in Africa, ten in Oceania, and seven in Europe.

Tzu Chi has been knitting together its dispersed congregations into a transnational network since 1995. Elsewhere I have described how Tzu Chi maintains itself as a movement with a charismatic center through a system of flow (Huang 2009). In general, this flow circulates in two directions: centrifugal and centripetal. One begins from the headquarters, moves around the island of Taiwan, and ends back at the headquarters; the other departs from different regions of Taiwan and the overseas branches and “returns” to the headquarters. The former is characterized by the master’s monthly tour around the island, usually referred to by followers as *shangren xingjiao* (the walk of the supreme person). The latter consists of an array of followers’ “homecoming” retreats such as the introductory tour, *Ciji lieche* (Tzu Chi Train) for general members, the recent variant *xungen* (root finding) for new members of title groups, the “civility” orientation retreat, children’s summer camps, and the most popular hospital volunteer retreat.

The system of flow expands from Taiwan to the transnational networks. Every January, core members from North and South America and Southeast Asia participate in a “Tzu Chi Spirit” retreat in Houston, Texas. In addition to horizontal ties between branches, the headquarters maintains direct ties to overseas branches. The lay executive, sometimes accompanied by one or two of Cheng Yen’s disciples, represents the headquarters and presides at every important ceremony of each major branch, such as the year-end thanksgiving party. Overseas members (including mainland Chinese) visit the headquarters in Taiwan as part of the “homecoming” ceremonies. Moreover, overseas followers take individual trips to the headquarters in the name of “finding one’s roots” (*xungen*), often obtaining a special audience with Cheng Yen and priority in the long waiting line for volunteer opportunities at the Tzu Chi hospital in Hualian. In addition to these occasional individual links to their religious “roots,” representatives of each branch join in an annual retreat in conjunction with the anniversary ceremony at the headquarters; the headquarters also has vacation camps exclusively for the overseas youth and followers’ school-age children. A system of transnational itineraries that centers on Taiwan has therefore emerged in the Tzu Chi worldwide organization.

In sum, Tzu Chi's overseas development is an ongoing process of transforming an ethnic religious association into both localized community service and an international nongovernmental organization (NGO) that are not limited by ethnic boundaries. At the same time, the linkage among Tzu Chi congregations has created not only itineraries that bring dispersed overseas Taiwanese and Chinese, in Peter L. Berger's (1967) terms, under the "sacred canopy" of Tzu Chi Buddhism but has also strengthened ties to Taiwan as a pilgrimage center for overseas Chinese. To some extent, Tzu Chi has created a new "homeland" of religious identity in Taiwan in lieu of the traditional cultural homeland in mainland China. In this sense, Tzu Chi worldwide development can be seen as a Tzu Chi diaspora (compare Vertovec 2000: 3).

### **III. Nodes of New York-Hualian Buddhist Networks**

At the time of my fieldwork in 1995, Tzu Chi New York branch fit in between the basic and the intermediate levels of Tzu Chi overseas branches. In 1991, under the supervision of the chief executive of Tzu Chi United States, Ms. K and her friends founded the New York branch at a core member's home. The branch has maintained slightly more than twenty core members since then, but has developed a total membership from two hundred in 1992 to twenty-five hundred in 1994. In September 1992, the branch moved to its rented office space in Flushing, New York. It remains in the same location today with additional sub-branches in the State of New York.

In early 1990, a commissioner, Ms. Q, migrated with her family from Taiwan to the United States. Ms. Q brought several Tzu Chi publications from Taiwan and distributed them to local Taiwanese through her cousin, Ms. J. Among those who received the materials were Ms. J's daughter and their family friend, Ms. K, who responded by spontaneously proselytizing for Tzu Chi. Both J. and K. have been pious Buddhists. Ms. K in particular, who later became the founder and first coordinator of Tzu Chi New York, had long participated in Buddhist classes and many weeklong Chan meditation retreats at local temples.

Ms. K began to collect money from her local Taiwanese friends and sent the contributions to Tzu Chi United States in California. Until the following year, Ms. K and her friends remained an informal circle of charitable women. This nascent group consisted of Taiwanese women, many of them Ms. K's friends at the Grand Temple (*Zhuangyan Si*)—a

Buddhist monastery in Carmel, New York. The New York branch therefore began with a few Taiwanese Buddhist women who later drew in their husbands. In fact, all of the first six local commissioners were women and their husbands who had known each other in Taiwan and had been regulars of the Grand Temple until they became actively engaged in Tzu Chi.

The linkage to the Grand Temple is one aspect of the Tzu Chi branch's embeddedness in the diverse yet lively Buddhist community in and around New York City. According to Qin's (1992: 5–6) research, in and around New York City there existed more than twenty-three Chinese Buddhist organizations. Eighteen of them were temples and the rest were lay organizations. Almost all the active members of Tzu Chi New York with whom I spoke said they already had been pious Buddhists prior to their participation in Tzu Chi. In addition to the Grand Temple, Tzu Chi members had frequented the Great Enlightenment Temple (*Dajue Si*) in the Bronx, the Compassionate Temple (*Ciyin Si*) in Flushing, and the Buddha's Gratitude Temple (*Foen Si*) in Chinatown, for Buddhist teachings. Moreover, both the Venerable Abbot Shengyan of the Chan Meditation Center (*Dongchu chansi*) in Elmhurst and the Learned Senior Xianming (a former abbot) of the Grand Temple, attended the founding ceremony of the Tzu Chi New York branch on June 16, 1991.

According to Qin's report (1992: 13–6), local Buddhist temples and associations adhered to the "traditional" practices of Chinese societies. Their major activities included Buddhist festivals (such as Buddha's birthday and the Ullambana Festival), retreats, and the fairly ritualistic practice of "releasing living creatures" (*fangsheng*). Although most Buddhist temples scheduled their major activities on Sundays according to the Christian calendar, their Sunday services consisted mainly of scripture chanting, teaching, meditation, and vegetarian feasts. In contrast, Tzu Chi in New York distinguished itself by its secular practice geared toward achieving concrete goals as directed by the ideals of humanistic Buddhism.

In sum, the development of Tzu Chi New York shows how ethnic and Buddhist trust networks may combine and complement each other. Information pertaining to Tzu Chi was brought straight from Taiwan through an immigrant (Ms. Q), then distributed through a network both ethnic (Taiwanese) and religious (Buddhist). When it reached a "structural hole" (Burt 2001) – i.e., Ms. J's daughter and Ms. K, Tzu Chi tapped into a trust network: Ms. K was able to collect donations without authorization from the headquarters in Taiwan and before any action for registration or legalization was initiated; and Ms. K and Ms. J's daughter could further

distribute and proselytize through the Buddhist networks of local temples. The founding of the New York branch was mainly based on a dense network of the six Taiwanese couples among whom the multiple linkages included ethnic, religious, and local. It then expanded from there. Their dense network was maintained partly as a result of common participation in local temples. In other words, the founding network was facilitated by and embedded in a local Buddhist trust network.

#### **IV. Nodes of Malacca-Hualian Buddhist Networks**

Tzu Chi established its Malacca branch in 1992 and became the head of offices across the Malay Peninsula and East Malaysia. Tzu Chi Malacca is obviously the most elaborate among the branches in southeast Asia and of the grandest scale in welfare contribution. Modeled upon the mission in Taiwan, Tzu Chi Malacca is active internationally in disaster relief and free clinics, and locally in garbage recycling and medical and charity services for both Chinese and other ethnic groups.

The Malacca branch was founded and continues to be led by Mr. and Mrs. Liu. The Lius had long been pious Buddhists, taking refuge in Taiwan Buddhism with popular monks prior to their migration. Mr. Liu distinguishes Tzu Chi from his previous Buddhist practice: "Our 'Pure Land' practice used to involve only chanting scriptures every day. The Dharma gate of Tzu Chi, which we now identify with, is more 'practical.'"

The Lius immigrated to Malaysia in 1988 to set up their garment factory in Malacca at exactly the same time that most of the labor-intensive factories began to move abroad due to the change in Taiwan's labor market. On one of her visits to Taiwan, Mrs. Liu read a Tzu Chi newsletter and hence took a trip to its headquarters. She was very touched and wanted to begin fund-raising in Malaysia, but her actual initiative did not begin until two years later, when she was introduced to the pioneer Tzu Chi practitioners through their lay Buddhist teacher in Kuala Lumpur. From these practitioners, the Lius learned how to perform locally: providing services instead of fund-raising. She and her workers began their regular volunteer work by cleaning at a local poor seniors' house (which consisted of mostly Chinese and Indians).

Mrs. Liu took her husband to visit the Tzu Chi headquarters, where he felt deeply touched by Tzu Chi's autonomous "way of cultivation" in this world. The Lius held the first charitable relief distribution at their factory in 1994, and built the Still Thoughts Hall in 1997 in the current parcel of land located in the free trade zone.

Although the Lius are Taiwanese immigrants, the Malacca branch members are primarily local Chinese. None of the staff members I met at the foundation office were from Taiwan. The youth corps of the branch also consists of only local-born Chinese. This is similar to the corps in Penang and different from the Taiwanese college students in Boston and Japan. Nevertheless, the Malacca branch not only shares with other branches a growing attention to campus and youth, but it also has shifted its local development to education. When Mrs. Liu began to feel stuck in Tzu Chi local development, she consulted a commissioner in Taiwan, who said, "Go to campuses." The results of introducing Tzu Chi into the Chinese educational system in Malaysia have been impressive. The branch has been able to hold Tzu Chi collegiate youth retreats of more than two thousand students in recent years. And many of the foundation staff members are former Tzu Chi youth who have turned their volunteer participation into professional careers. In addition to the youth corps, the Malacca branch has succeeded in gradually influencing Chinese high school students. Despite her lack of teaching experience, Mrs. Liu has been demonstrating Tzu Chi "Still Thought Pedagogy" in local Chinese high schools. Her efforts resulted in the formation of the Tzu Chi Teachers' Association in Malaysia, the first one of its kind outside of Taiwan, whose members include Tzu Chi teachings in their students' curricula.

Except for its leaders, the Malacca branch has few Taiwanese. Although there are many Taiwanese small shopkeepers and entrepreneurs in Malacca and in other cities that have local chapters under the Malacca branch, they tend to contribute money rather than participate in Tzu Chi activities. Both Mr. and Mrs. Liu spent time with the Taiwanese circle when they arrived twelve years ago, and it was then a relatively small group. The Lius eventually distanced themselves from it because of different lifestyles. Mr. Liu raised funds among Taiwanese entrepreneurs for Tzu Chi but did not find further social involvement appealing.



It is important to note that Mrs. Liu was a pious Buddhist as well as transnationalist. Mrs. Liu disseminated Buddhist information from Taiwan prior to her visit to Tzu Chi headquarters. Her first instinct to carry out Tzu Chi in Malaysia by collecting money locally and sending it back to Taiwan was in line with her hitherto “traditional” practice of Buddhist charity; that is, through donations either to those in need or to those who could carry out the charity’s mission. But soon they found the traditional Buddhist approach unfulfilling and found inspiration in Tzu Chi.

It started out as a team of a few office staff members led by Mrs. Liu. Through the staff members’ network, they learned about a nursing home that needed volunteers. In addition, the female factory workers informed them of individuals and families that were in need of help. “Because of their own living environment, they’re more likely to know people who have been suffering, and they reported to us,” Citian explained,

We followed the address as reported to us... And when we visited one house, their neighbors were curious... Why had this deserted household suddenly gotten so many visitors? We told them we’re here to help. They would report other families who also needed help. So we have more and more cases ... Then we held a reception (*chahui*, literally, “tea party,” Tzu Chi’s term for reception) at Mrs. Liu’s office, and told everyone to bring their friends and family here to learn about Tzu Chi.

Elsewhere I have described and analyzed the appeal of Tzu Chi to local followers<sup>iii</sup> (Huang 2009, 2010a, 2010b). In sum, the short history of Tzu Chi Malacca has gone through a few stages in terms of expanding and tapping into social networks:

The short history of Tzu Chi Malacca has gone through a few stages in terms of expanding and tapping into social networks:

The story traces back to **(1) economic migration:** The Lius migrated from Taiwan to Malaysia for the advantage of the free trade zone. The initial migration further combines with **(2) Buddhist transnational practice:** Mrs. Liu continued to carry Buddhist media between Taiwan and Malaysia. Moreover, the Lius’ Buddhist practice became dyadic transnational, as they became followers of a Buddhist monk, *Boyuan Zhanglao*, in Malaysia as well as frequenting the Tzu Chi headquarters in Taiwan. The Malaysia-based monk

eventually connected Mrs. Liu to a handful of Chinese Malaysian Tzu Chi pioneers in Perak who gave Mrs. Liu hands-on instruction in carrying out charity work. **(3) At this point, through a network broker**, i.e., Buoyuan, between two different social networks, the Taiwan-Malaysia transnational Buddhist network is connected to the local Buddhist network in Malaysia. However, according to Mr. Liu and Tzu Chi publications, the pioneers in Perak eventually disappeared and did not serve as a significant structural hole between Taiwanese transnational Buddhists and Tzu Chi Malaysia networks. **(4) Rather, the connection to local trust networks took place in the work place**, i.e., the Liu's garment factory, from the clerks to the factory workers, and to the workers' neighborhood. However, proselytizing occurred mainly among the clerks, whom, like Citian, the accountant, had already been responding to Mrs. Liu's Buddhist charitable causes even before her Tzu Chi connection, whereas information inter-links the pool of factory workers – both in discovering prospective charity recipients and in publicizing the nascent Tzu Chi Malacca by expanding the number of participants for the “tea party.”

Most devotees I interviewed in 2004 came to Tzu Chi during this early stage, which they often refer to as “*Shangqiao* period” (*Shangqiao* is the name of the Lius' garment factory). It was the period when Tzu Chi's activities were held in the canteen of the factory complex, prior to the completion of the Still Thoughts Hall in 1997. However, as early as 1995, Mrs. Liu had begun to tap into one of the most important Chinese Malaysian networks: **(5) The Chinese education system**, *huawen jiaoyu* (Chinese written characters education) or more often in its shorten term, *huajiao* (Chinese education). At this juncture, the connection between Tzu Chi and the Chinese education system is Mr. Z, a supervisor at the Bureau of Education in the State of Malacca, who met Mrs. Liu through the principal of a Chinese school in 1995. A pious and learned Buddhist, Mr. Z responded to Mrs. Liu's proposal for Still Thoughts pedagogy, and began to promote the religion among the teachers of Chinese education system while becoming an active devotee in Tzu Chi Malacca. Mr. Z was apparently a structural hole between the Tzu Chi network and the local Chinese education network. The result was the formation of the Tzu Chi Teachers' Club, extending the Lius' work-related and Taiwan-related networks to agents of Chinese schooling, which is one of the “three pillars” of the Malaysian Chinese civil society.

Slightly overlapping with, yet starting a bit later than, the utilization of the Chinese education networks was **(6) the growth of Buddhist study clubs in colleges**, which Tzu Chi tapped into around 1997. If the Chinese education system can be called a reservoir of bridging social capital in reaching students and parents of a wide range of Chinese Malaysians in Malacca, the college Buddhist club network would be its counterpart for bonding social capital. The majority of staff in the Malacca office as well as in the Kuala Lumpur and even Singapore offices are former Tzu Chi college youth who easily relate to each other through class years and cohorts. They first encountered Tzu Chi through the Buddhist clubs on campus, wherein they formed their own separate Tzu Chi group, lived together off campus, a bit like a fraternity or sorority group, and mobilized students for Tzu Chi summer camps. Some became full time (paid) staff immediately upon graduation, and others worked elsewhere (even outside of Malacca) and eventually “returned” to Tzu Chi. For example, Huiwan was in the second cohort of Tzu Chi youth in her college. 11 out of the 12 members in her cohort became full-time paid staff in Tzu Chi offices in Malacca, Kuala Lumpur, and Singapore. The one exception was due to pressure from his family who regard jobs at Tzu Chi as under-paid under-employment.

**(7) Overlapping with the above mentioned social networks are the local Buddhist networks.** The remaining devotees who did not belong to any of the above mentioned social networks came to Tzu Chi through public events, such as “tea party” receptions. Some of them learned about the event and the group through small announcements in local Chinese newspapers. The majority of them learned about the information through, and came to the events to keep company with, a friend from another Buddhist social network. Even those who learned through the newspapers made their initial visits as a result of being encouraged by fellow Buddhist friends. In other words, as early as the “*shangqiao* period,” Tzu Chi Malacca had begun to tap into the local Buddhist social networks.

Local followers in Malacca come from four sources of Buddhist networks:

(a) Buddhist study groups in neighborhoods or, in local terms, parks (*huayuan* in Chinese, or *taman* in Malay),

(b) Buddhist study groups at colleges/universities,

(c) the sutra chanting classes and dharma events at local popular temples (mainly, *Cheng Hoon Teng* and *Seck Kha Een*), and

(d) a variety of Buddhist associations. These range from the most organized, active, nationwide monastic network, Malaysia Buddhist Association (*Malaixiya fuojiao zonghui*, commonly referred to by its abbreviation, *Mafozong*) and the equally organized yet far more intellectual, publicly outspoken (especially on issues of Chinese civil rights) Young Buddhist Association of Malaysia (YBAM, *Malaixia fuojiao qingnian xieghui*, commonly referred to by its abbreviation, *Mafuoqing*), as well as other groups of smaller scale, such as *jingzong xuehui* (Pure Land Study Association).

A couple of devotees did not connect to Tzu Chi through any of the above-mentioned networks. They came to Tzu Chi through a work-related network, a neighborhood and public event sign-up, and a personal network, respectively. A closer look at their retrospectives show that they were either pious Buddhists or they felt strong personal ties to Mr. or Mrs. Liu.

In sum, following Dean's research on the religious networks between Putian of Fujian and southeast Asia, different trust networks connect the local Melakan Buddhist to the Taiwanese initiative through several "sites or nodes (a node can be a village, a social institution or religious group, or an individual)" (Dean 2009: 773):

1. The Lius (including their employees at the factory, and those who stayed at Tzu Chi even without other overlapping social networks, such as the physician and the computer vendor)

2. The Chinese education system

3. The Buddhist clubs in college

4. The local Buddhist associations including sutra chanting groups in popular temples

## V. Buddhism and Trust Networks

What then is the role of Buddhism in the varieties of social networks? What are the identifiable trust networks? How is Buddhism related to them? Buddhism plays a role in the three levels of trust networks:

Buddhism is the foundation for the most generalized trust network for monetary charitable donation. "Doing good" in the name of Buddhism, even just in the loosely defined popular Buddhist terms, can be as self-explanatory as immediate mobilization, even translocally. The New York division began with a spontaneous mobilization for collecting donations to send transnationally. In Malacca, Mrs. Liu began mobilizing charitable donations before her Tzu Chi contacts: she and her employees collected money and sent it to the local Chinese newspaper in response to any coverage of people in need of help. Followers in Malacca traced back their initial contact with Tzu Chi through donations, even without any follow-up participation for years after the first donation.

The Buddhist charity donation trust network continues even after an individual becomes devoted to Tzu Chi in particular. For example, the computer vendor who confessed to not spending enough time with family while busy with Tzu Chi, would continue to respond to any sales of coupons for fundraising bazaars and banquets from other Buddhist groups. Buddhism-based thin trust for charity donations lays the groundwork for Tzu Chi proselytizing. Ms. Q, for example, was able to recruit 500 members in Malacca on her own, regardless of her illiteracy. She began with her family, and continued on with her friends and neighbors. When she exhausted her primary and secondary networks, she made use of thin trust in local settings. In her words: "I visit every member at home to collect monthly dues. If any bystander or onlooker seems to pay attention to my smiley face, my benevolent smile, I would immediately go over. He (she) asks what are you doing? I say I am collecting charity money for Tzu Chi. I'll tell him (her) how great Tzu Chi is and our master [Cheng Yen]..."

Such a trust network may also combine with other personal networks. For example, the former hairdresser, Ms. H, said she first bought Tzu Chi fundraising bazaar coupons

through a friend, who was her neighbor and exercised in the same park. She did not ask further which Buddhist group or the specific cause for the coupons and simply gave her RM50 (about US\$13 in 2004) for five booklets. Her neighbor took the cash and did not give her the booklets immediately. On the day of the event, Ms. H and her family happened to pass by the bazaar, where she ran into her friend's sister, Y., who was the head of social work at the Malacca branch. Ms. H told Y. that she had signed up for five booklets through her sister. Since RM50 is already five times of the minimum donation for initial membership, Y. took the chance to further encourage her to sign up as a Tzu Chi volunteer. Ms. H hesitated because she did not know what volunteer work would involve. Y. persisted and Ms. H. agreed to try.

Second, Buddhism in the context of Tzu Chi contributes to transnational bonding social capital and trust networks. For example, Y. was a devoted volunteer for a long time until she was laid off and came to work for Tzu Chi. She said she feels very "safe" when she is in Taiwan. She had been to Taiwan seven times at the time of our interview. She said she just likes to go back to Taiwan, although she has only one personal connection, not a close tie, despite her frequent visits. She said each and every time she visits Taiwan, she is surrounded by Tzu Chi people from the moment she exits the airport gate. Tzu Chi Buddhism bonds within the group yet bridges inter-Asian connections.

In Malacca, Tzu Chi Buddhism also thickens internal trust. For example, Ms. Q completely relies on lifts from other members to participate in Tzu Chi. Except for a lapse in the first year, Ms. Q has never failed to garner a lift for her next trip to any of the many scheduled Tzu Chi events. The trust and the resources in the Tzu Chi Buddhist network are particularly salient when compared to her former membership in other Buddhist associations. Her participation at the weekly sutra chanting in a popular temple in downtown was made possible by her son, never by any of her fellow participants. She has also attended *rensheng foxue* (Buddhism for Human Life), a lay Buddhist study group located not far from the popular temple in downtown Malacca. But she was not able to get a lift after her first visit. And no one called upon her to offer her a lift after her first participation.

Finally, while Tzu Chi Buddhism develops bonds and lays bridges across trust networks, it is more or less as a result of declining social trust in local settings. It is in this

sense, religion may serve to circumvent trust networks. For example, C., the former accountant at the Lius' factory, became committed after learning how Tzu Chi changed juvenile delinquency in Taiwan, and felt this could be the solution to the rising crime rate in Malacca. In further example, the former hairdresser, Ms. H, suddenly became very verbal and somewhat emotional after our formal interview. She was then in her late 60s and felt extremely grateful to Tzu Chi because it keeps her away from bad friends. As it turned out, her mother had been addicted to gambling until death. Ms. H could not stop her mother, and had no choice but to take up the responsibility of raising her brother's children whose tuition was gambled away by their grandmother. She said that in old age, friends come over to tell you that you've worked all your life and now it's time to "relax and play." Staying in Tzu Chi, being embedded in a network of trustworthy people, is the best thing happened to her, because it keeps her from being affected by any of the "bad" social networks. In a slightly different example, H.W., a former Tzu Chi youth and a full time staff, found a sense of trustworthiness being among a group of good people, preventing her enthusiasm and activism from being involved in "wrong" social network.

## VI. Conclusion

Coming back to the beginning vignette: What Ms. Q and her inter-Asia trust network shows is that religion may foster trust networks locally, and at the same time, bolters thin trust transnationally. In other words, religion bonds intra-group and bridges inter-Asia. Such processes of bonding and bridging may be a result of circumventing trust networks through moralizing its own NGO-ness.

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<sup>i</sup> *World Gazetteer*, [www.world-gazetteer.com/wg.php?x=&men=gcis&lng=en&des=gamelan&srt=pnan&col=dhoq&msz=1500&geo=-152](http://www.world-gazetteer.com/wg.php?x=&men=gcis&lng=en&des=gamelan&srt=pnan&col=dhoq&msz=1500&geo=-152), access October 27, 2010.

<sup>ii</sup> "Monthly Report," Population Statistics, Hualian County, [web.hl.gov.tw/static/population/pop-index.htm](http://web.hl.gov.tw/static/population/pop-index.htm), access October 27, 2010

<sup>iii</sup> Among the fourteen local adherents this paper refers to (not including the Lius) were ten females and four males. Seven were born between 1931 and 1956, four between 1960 and 1965, and three between 1972 and 1977; seven first came to Tzu Chi before or during 1997 (the year when the local branch building was erected) and the rest after 1997 (age groups are distributed equally between the two periods). Except for the one Caucasian from Australia, the thirteen Chinese-ethnic interviewees included only one Taiwanese and the other twelve were born locally with no relations in Taiwan. Four were from relatively lower-income backgrounds, the Australian was unemployed, and the other three had retired from jobs as a nurse, a tailor, and a barber. Seven were from middle-class backgrounds or had spouses who were small shopkeepers or professionals (accountant/secretary/educator/preschool principal), and three were either from the upper-middle class or their spouses were (physician and entrepreneur). The Taiwanese was a first-generation immigrant and the twelve born locally were at least second- and mostly third-generation migrants from mainland China. Except for one straits-born Chinese who didn't know her ancestors' hometown, the ancestral origin or dialect group (language spoken at home) of the other eleven locally born interviewees were: five Hokkien, five Canton (four Teochu and one Hakka), and one Hainan. Three out of five Cantonese descendents were from outside Malacca. The sample, therefore, reflects the local Chinese



population quite well: predominantly Hokkien and primarily descents of nineteenth-century immigrants.

All of the thirteen Chinese-ethnic interviewees worked for Tzu Chi more than one day a week, and the Australian had worked for four months. In fact, as they listed their activities, all of them worked for Tzu Chi every day, either coming to volunteer at the branch or participating in activities such as sorting garbage for recycling and visiting the charity recipients and nursing homes, or going out individually to collect membership dues. Three of the interviewees were full-time staff members who also spent their free time as volunteers.