

Buddhist Modernism and Animal Welfare in Taiwan

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ABSTRACT:

This paper will discuss the relationship between Buddhist modernism and animal welfare in Taiwan by focusing on the example of bhikkhuni Ven. Chao Hwei. It will proceed to discuss how Buddhist modernism is shaped in contemporary Taiwan and how it is relevant to animal welfare.

Keywords: Buddhist modernism, animal welfare, animal release

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Fangsheng, or “animal release”/“release of living beings” is a popular religious practice in Taiwan. In this ritual, captive animals are released (mostly) into the wild with the belief that the act would generate merit for the human participants. According to Stokes & Shiu, this practice is “one of the regularly performed rituals [...] throughout Asia, and in recent decades, in the West” (2008, 181). The practice of *fangsheng* has long been a contentious issue in Taiwan; I myself was drawn into this issue by media frenzy over the release of venomous snakes into the wild by a Buddhist group in mid-2012.¹ Nevertheless, many Buddhists in Taiwan continue to see the practice of *fangsheng* as a realization for animal welfare (Chen, 2010). Lin & Lee find that Taiwan Buddhist discourse on *fangsheng* changes over time and assess the group, Life Conservationist Association (*guanhuai shengming xiehui*, “LCA” hereafter), as a Buddhist response to environmentalist criticism against the practice of *fangsheng* (Lin and Lee 2012, 243). In the course of examining LCA’s discourse on animal welfare, I notice the elements of Buddhist modernism. Intrigued, I decided to take a furtherer look into the relationship between Buddhist modernism and the discourse on animal welfare in Taiwan by using the example of LCA’s founder, *bhikkhuni* Ven. Chao Hwei. This paper is the preliminary finding.

Animal Welfare

The founding of LCA can be traced back to early 1990s when there emerged in Taiwan a popular fishing game, *cuoyu* (stabbing fish), in which

¹ For example, see “Fangsheng Dushe Zhengyi Buzai Wuzhong Ershi Niuqu de Xinyang jiajih,” by Liao Shirui, Yam News, <http://n.yam.com/yam/earth/20120617/20120617549872.html>, accessed on 2012/11/06.

people fished not with a proper bait but with a hook. The fisher would repeatedly stab the fish with a hook and only when the fish was stabbed to death, it was pulled out of the pond. Needless to say, this method of fishing is cruel and inhumane and naturally provoked protest. According to the website of LCA, *bhikkhuni* Ven. Chao Hwei started *the anti-cuoyu* movement in early 1992. The movement gained nationwide attention and eventually prompted the government to decree a ban on *cuoyu*. LCA website states:

Afterward, many like-minded friends felt that people in Taiwan have an indifferent attitude towards [animals]. This indifference leads to abuse of [animals] and as time goes on, the abuse becomes an acceptable norm. All of these problems cannot be solved by short-time media frenzy. There is a need for long term education to seed the idea of loving and caring for animals [*(aihu shingling, zhenxiwuming)*] in people [...].²

LCA was thus officially founded in January 1993, not long after the ban on *cuoyu* was decreed.³

Although the Chinese name of LCA means ‘caring for life’ (*guanhuai shengming*), it is in fact mainly an animal right organization. A slogan on its website explains the connotation: “To care for the animals is a starting point to care for life.”⁴ It goes on to condemn anthropocentrism:

Consequently, “to care for the animals and to care for life as a

² <http://www.lca.org.tw/about/about-LCA>, accessed on 2013/2/9. My translation.

³ <http://www.lca.org.tw/en/about-LCA>, accessed on 2013/2/15.

⁴ *Ibid.*

starting point” would cultivate the mankind to learn how to treat other animals’ lives and welfare in equality. In fact it is the promotion of a more popular and in-depth social morality for the entire human community. The liberation of the animals is indeed the emancipation of the human beings from the prejudice of “Species Discrimination”.⁵

It is interesting to see terms such as “social morality” and “Species Discrimination” being used in the statement above, for they are not usually found in pre-modern Buddhist discourse. These terms indicate Buddhist modernism.

To understand the principles behind LCA, it is necessary to learn about the founding *bhikkhuni* and chairperson of LCA from 1993 to 1999, *bhikkhuni* Ven. Chao Hwei. Born in Myanmar in 1957 with the lay name, Lu Qiongzhaio, she and her family immigrated to Taiwan in 1965. At the age of 21, as a junior student at university, she donned the robe and received *bhikkhuni* ordination two years later. By the time of writing this essay, she has emerged as a well-known social activist in Taiwan. Her social activities range from Buddhist protection movement, gender equality in Buddhism, anti-gambling, and to of course, animal welfare.⁶ In August 2012, *bhikkhuni* Ven. Chao Hwei attracted international attention when she presided over a Buddhist same-sex wedding for two lesbians, the first in Taiwan Buddhism.⁷

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Website of Hongshi Buddhist Cultural and Educational Foundation, <http://www.hongshi.org.tw/teacher.aspx>, accessed on 2013/2/15.

⁷ For example see CNN report on the wedding, “Two Buddhist Brides Wed in Taiwan” by Alexis Lai, August 13 2012, <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/08/13/world/asia/taiwan-buddhist-same-sex-wedding>, accessed on 2013/2/15.

In her own words, *bhikkhuni* Ven. Chao Hwei began her social activist movement as an advocate for animal rights:

Early on, my focus had been mainly on issues of human rights and environmental conservation. Since such issues tended to be related to the problems of legality and policy making, I was obliged to expand my vision from social engagement to political engagement. (C.-H. Shih 2008, 125)

She attributes her engagement with social activities as a practice of Bodhisattva Path. She says:

According to Buddhist perspective, suffering comes from misconduct (of individuals, others, or common/share evil deeds). And, now that the Buddhists who practice the Bodhisattva Path always have mercy for all the sinful, suffering beings, they would never give up any one of them. This is probably why such practitioners are destined to carry on the endless deep sorrow of the fellow sentient beings throughout endless birth and death! (C.-H. Shih 2008, 125)

There in the statement above are Mahāyāna rhetoric and the identification with the Bodhisattva Path; both are common in Buddhist discourse in Taiwan.

What distinguishes her from common Mahāyāna rhetoric on animal welfare is her application of Western philosophy in her works. For example, in a paper about Buddhist ethics, she cites works of Hume, Kant, etc. in an attempt to set her argumentation through the theorization of meta-ethics (C.-H. Shih 2006). Notably, half-way through the paper she returns to the

usage of Buddhist theory of dependent-origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) for her discussion (C.-H. Shih 2006, 111-118). Even the usage of the dependent-origination theory is interesting. In another paper, *bhikkhuni* Ven. Chao Hwei again uses the dependent-origination theory to argue for a Buddhist perspective on living beings (C.-H. Shih 2011). It has been noted that the theory of dependent-origination was not an emphasized concept in Asian Buddhism until Western and/or Western-influenced Buddhist writers connect the theory with ecology (McMahan 2008, 149-182) and subsequently animal welfare. Take the teaching of the late 16th century Chinese monk, Yunqi Zhuhong (1535-1615) as an example: Yunqi Zhuhong's teaching is fundamental in the popularization of *fangsheng* and yet his teaching uses little of the theory of dependent -origination (Lee 2002). There are evident elements of Buddhist modernism in *bhikkhuni* Ven. Chao Hwei's discourse on animal welfare.

Buddhist Modernism

Much attention has been paid to Western Orientalists' (re)construction of Buddhism, which is presumed to affect not only Buddhist discourse in the West (e.g. see Clarke, 1997) but also the perception and presentation of Asian Buddhists on their own tradition. Gombrich terms this (re)constructed Buddhism as "Protestant Buddhism":

We find intertwined three characteristics of Protestant Buddhism. It tends to fundamentalism, despising tradition; it claims that Buddhism is 'scientific', 'rational', 'not a religion', etc.; and it depends on English concepts, even when expressed in Sinhala. (Gombrich 1988, 195)

The term “Protestant Buddhism” has often been criticized not least because of the author’s supposed Eurocentric bias and misunderstanding of Asian custom (Goonatilake 2001). The emphasis on Western influence is also problematic, for throughout the history, Buddhism has always to adapt and transform to meet different context it finds itself in. It is too simplistic to see Western influence as the primary factor in the Buddhist transformation in the past two centuries.

Similarly contestable is the label “Buddhist modernism”. It is not uncommon for scholars of Buddhist Studies to view Buddhist modernism as an inauthentic form of Buddhism and impossible to have emerged without the input of Westerners:

[...] the new salvage genre of Buddhist Studies, based on a rejection of Buddhist modernism as inauthentic, now claims that we must reject the voices of certain contemporary Buddhists as tainted by Western ideas and ignorant of Western influence on Buddhism ... the new generation of salvage studies locates authenticity in pre-Western, “traditional” Buddhism. (Quli 2009, 25)

The binary assumption of modern/traditional and East/West simplifies the complex situation of Buddhism as a living tradition. The encounter with Occidentalism and Western imperialism in the past few centuries was but a necessary challenge for Asian Buddhists to respond to. Chu has well documented how Chinese Buddhist reformers in the early twentieth century, most notably *bhikkhu* Ven. Taixu (1890-1947) and Ven. Yinshun (1906-2005), transformed Chinese Buddhism by emphasizing the need to return to the Buddhist “origin”, purging theist elements in Buddhism and underlining the

importance of critical thinking (2006). Whether it is the result of Western Orientalist manipulation or the need for Asian Buddhists to respond to challenges of modern time, Buddhism, as presented by Buddhist modernism, is “westernized, demythologized, rationalized, Romanticized, Protestantized, or psychologized” (McMahan 2008, 8). If LCA is a Buddhist response to environmentalist criticism against centuries-old Buddhist practice of *fangsheng* (Lin and Lee 2012, 243), it is conceivable that LCA and *bhikkhuni* Ven. Chao Hwei’s discourse on animal welfare should contain elements of Buddhist modernism.

Perhaps because she is also an academician who needs to widen her discussion or perhaps because she is a student of the reformist *bhikkhu* Ven. Yinshun, much of *bhikkhuni* Ven. Chao Hwei’s discussion on Buddhist ethics of animal welfare does merely articulate traditional Buddhist reasoning but frequently evokes Western philosophy (e.g. C.H. Shih, 2011). For this, she is unapologetic. In fact she credits Western philosophy for inspiring her own theory of Buddhist ethics:

I think it is all right to say that modern Buddhism is influenced by the West. Western influence is good. To be honest, if I were to focus only on traditional Buddhist studies, those issues would never have occurred to me. By reading Kant, Hume, Peter Singer and Tom Regan, I was inspired to think over those issues and then to look at those issues through Buddhist perspective. Not to extend their theories but to compare. Had not been their sophisticated thinking, mine would have been as sophisticated. (C.-H. Shih, 2013)

At the same time, *bhikkhuni* Ven. Chao Hwei draws on Buddhist tradition of

commentary to support her study method:

It is not the influence of the 19th century [Orientalists]; Buddhist commentators all use [this method of study]. A commentator would always look for evidence to support his theory. This is called allusion [*jiaozheng*] and then there is the logic inference [*lizheng*]. There is the holy teaching [*shengjiaoliang*] and there is the critique [*biliang*]. He needs both, or he won't be able to conduct his reasoning. I was not influenced by the 19th century scholars. I primarily base my study on the style of Buddhist commentators. We must go back to the origin. (C.-H. Shih, 2013)

What is interesting is that while *bhikkhuni* Ven. Chao Hwei does not deny the influence of Western philosophy on her theorization of Buddhist ethics, she defends her study method as essentially Buddhist. This might be a reflection of the characteristic of “going back to origin” in Buddhist modernism but more importantly, a claim to be “authentic Buddhist” in her discourse. Critiques might see it as hybridity between East and West, but *bhikkhuni* Ven. Chao Hwei sees it as an attempt to reach out to a wider audience:

As for whom [I am writing] is a question. The reason of my using Western [philosophy] is that when I am doing comparison, I notice the difference ... then you can look at the issue through Buddhist perspective; how does the theory differ from Buddhist Dharma? How is the theory compatible with Buddhist Dharma? That's how I work. So, for whom I am writing? On the one

hand, I want Buddhists learn about Western study of ethics. On the other hand, I wish that contemporary philosophers might notice the characteristic of Buddhist ethics. So, there is the intention for dialogue. (C.-H. Shih, 2013)

In other words, Buddhism is marketed to meet not only the interests of Buddhists but also the people who are interested in ethical concerns. Considering that LCA is the outcome of environmentalist criticism against Buddhist practice of *fangsheng*, it is of little wonder that *bhikkhuni* Ven. Chao Hwei's response to the criticism must step outside the traditional Buddhist rhetoric about animals.

Conclusion

In this paper, I discuss one case of Taiwan Buddhist discourse on animal welfare. There are certainly other cases of Taiwan Buddhist discourse that articulate along the line of traditional Buddhist rhetoric. For example, one of the most controversial and most active Buddhist groups in Taiwan that engages in conducting *fangsheng* is China Preserve Life Association (*zhonghua husheng xiehui*); in its website, the concepts of non-harming precept, karma and rebirth are used. These are concepts commonly publicized in promoting the practice of *fangsheng* by Chinese Buddhism prior to the 20th century (Stokes and Shiu, 2008). On the other hand, LCA seeks to provide animal welfare through legislation and education and frowns upon (though not an outright criticism) the practice of *fangsheng*. The difference illustrates the multiplicity of Buddhist scene in Taiwan.

The ethical theory developed by *bhikkhuni* Ven. Chao Hwei and the direction undertaken by LCA are better seen as a “marketing strategy” for a

society whose view on Buddhist practice of *fangsheng* has modified considerably since World War II (Lin and Lee 2012) rather than the result of hybridity or even cultural-colonialism. This reshaping of Buddhism for modern concerns is neither new nor uncommon; the association of Buddhism with ecology is a familiar example (Callicott, 2008). Quli rightly notes that Buddhist modernism should not be considered less authentic or less Buddhist than the pre-modern form of Asian Buddhism (2009). Elements of Buddhist modernism in *bhikkhuni* Ven. Chao Hwei's discourse on animal welfare is therefore just that, Buddhist.

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