Reformulating Buddhism and Making a Global Social Movement: A Sociological Study of the Tzu Chi Foundation in Taiwan and Hong Kong

HUANG Ping

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Principal Supervisor: Dr. CHAN Shun Hing

Hong Kong Baptist University

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ABSTRACT

This is a case study of the Tzu Chi movement in Taiwan and Hong Kong. In the past 40 years, Taiwan has witnessed a booming development in Buddhism. The Tzu Chi movement is a prominent one. The current study used a synthesis theoretical framework combining three factors – political opportunities, mobilizing structures, and framing processes – to analyze the Tzu Chi movement’s emergence and development phases.

From 1979 to 1989, Tzu Chi emerged as a nationwide movement with three missions (charity, medicine and education) that aimed to solve concrete problems. The timing and form of Tzu Chi’s emergence were dominantly shaped by the established political order and the changes in political opportunities. In the 1970s and the 1980s, the relative changes in policies provided the possibility for the Tzu Chi movement’s emergence. The industrial process of Taiwan society and the inefficiency of the welfare system were the other two conditions facilitating Tzu Chi’s emergence.

After 1990, Tzu Chi began to promote its fourth mission – culture – and to expand globally. During this period, Tzu Chi officially established its own ideological system by reformulating Buddhism based on a global logic. It therefore became a global social movement and entered into its development phase. Political opportunities and framing processes in the development phase were more the products of mobilizing structures than they were during the emergence phase of the movement.

In reference to Tzu Chi and its global expansion, the role of SMOs helps to explain how the Tzu Chi movement emerged, even in foreign lands that are very different from Taiwan. However, the factors of political opportunities and framing processes are not completely passive. The level of the Tzu Chi movement’s development is still affected by some interactions between them.

Regarding Tzu Chi as a global movement, Hong Kong is an example of its expansion outside Taiwan. The Tzu Chi Hong Kong branch could not develop and expand to today’s scale without support and resources from the headquarters. However, there are some factors limiting Tzu Chi’s development, which will be revealed in the course of this study.
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