

## The Emergence of the Sahā Triad in Contemporary Taiwan: Iconic Representation and Humanistic Buddhism

In January, 2001, I visited the village of Sanyi 三義 in Miaoli 苗栗 (central Taiwan), an arts center specializing in wood sculpture. Among the Buddhist sculptures on display, I frequently encountered a triad configuration depicting Buddha Śākyamuni flanked by the bodhisattvas Avalokiteśvara (Guanyin 觀音) and Kṣitigarbha (Dizang 地藏) (figures 1–2). The sales assistants identified this trio as the “Sahā Triad” (*suopo sansheng* 娑婆三聖), a designation that was sometimes written on accompanying shop labels.

Worship of triads has long been a hallmark of Chinese religious practice.<sup>1</sup> In Chinese Buddhism, the most popular triad is indubitably the “Triad of the Western Direction 西方三聖,”<sup>2</sup> that is, the trio of Buddha Amitābha, Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, and Bodhisattva Mahāsthāmaprāpta who preside over the Western Land of Supreme Bliss 西方極樂世界. Sahā (“enduring,” or “suffering”) refers to the Sanskrit phrase *sahāloka* (“Sahā World”), which in Buddhist cosmology is the world system that we live in, as opposed to other worlds such as

<sup>1</sup> The concept of an inseparable triad of Heaven, Earth, and Humanity has always been popular in Chinese thought. This became the basis, from late-imperial China onward, for the development of the *tiandi hui* 天地會, or the Heaven and Earth Gathering, also known as the Triad Society, studied by Barend J. ter Haar, *Ritual & Mythology of the Chinese Triads: Creating an Identity* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1998). Also, even before the Eastern Han, popular Daoist religion developed the worship of a triad, the Three Ones (or Sanyi 三一). Buddhist triads showing a Buddha flanked by two bodhisattvas likely first appeared in the pre-Chinese Buddhist context, and occurred early in the history of Chinese Buddhist art. On the symbolism of triads in world religions, see Geoffrey Parinder, “Triads,” in Mircea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1986) 15, p. 44.

<sup>2</sup> The phrase, “Triad of the Western Direction” was coined in China, and does not translate any Indian usage. A preliminary survey suggests that the first recorded appearance in Chinese Buddhist writings occurs in *Fozu tongji* 佛祖統紀, compiled by the Song monk Zhipan 志磐 (fl. 1258–1269 AD); see *T* no. 2035, vol. 49, pp. 209B–18C. In the same text, we see the phrase “Three Images of the Western Direction 西方三像”; p. 219C. We can tentatively conclude that this usage was not found in the Tang, although further investigation is needed. The phrase is certainly commonplace in modern Chinese Buddhism.

the Land of Supreme Bliss in the West.<sup>3</sup> The so-called Sahā Triad has no antecedent in Buddhist history, and appears to be a phenomenon that has recently surfaced in Taiwan. Its appearance among Buddhist images in Sanyi indicates the existence of a fairly good market for this triad configuration. While a few sets of the Sahā Triad images are almost life-size statues (figure 1) intended for worship in public temples or monasteries, the majority of the images are relatively small (figure 2) and likely intended for household shrines.



*Figure 1. Example of Sahā Triad Images*

*On display in a shop at Sanyi, Miaoli (central Taiwan).  
All pictures are from the author's collection.*

I questioned shop assistants on the origin of this specific configuration (Śākyamuni flanked by Guanyin and Dizang), and they unanimously attributed it to Ciji (Tz'u Chi) 慈濟,<sup>4</sup> a Buddhist charitable organization that in recent decades has swept over the religious landscape of Taiwan.<sup>5</sup> It was founded in 1966

<sup>3</sup> A variant of *sahā* that sometimes occurs in Indian texts is *sabhā* ("confused congregation") – probably derived from *sabhaya*, "a land of fear"; see Akira Sadakata, *Buddhist Cosmology: Philosophy and Origins* (Tokyo: Kōsei Publishing Co., 1997), pp. 113–14.

<sup>4</sup> The official title of the organization is Fojiao Ciji Gongdehui 佛教慈濟功德會, translated as The Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Association, according to *The Tzu Chi Glossary*, compiled by the Foreign Language Publications Department 慈濟外文期刊部 (Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation, 1999), p. 26. Please note that, for consistency of usage, my main text uses the *pinyin* romanization Ciji, rather than Tzu Chi. However, for citation purposes, I usually retain the romanization employed in the original.

<sup>5</sup> In recent decades, Ciji has generated considerable scholarly attention in Taiwan and abroad, especially in the fields of anthropology, sociology, and women's studies. For scholarship in English, see Chien-yu Julia Huang and Robert P. Weller, "Merit and Mothering: Women and Social Welfare in Taiwanese Buddhism," *Journal of Asian Studies* 57 (1998), pp. 379–96. Hwei-Syin Lu, "Gender and Buddhism in Contemporary Taiwan – A Case Study of Tzu Chi Foundation," *Proceedings of the National Science Council, Part C: Humanities and Social Sciences* 8.4 (1998), pp. 539–50; André Laliberté, "Tzu Chi and the Buddhist Revival in Taiwan: Rise of a New Conservatism?" *China Perspectives* 19 (Sept./Oct. 1998), pp. 44–50; idem, "The Relief Work of the Ciji Foundation: Welfare Orientalism in Action," paper presented at the Association for Asian Studies Annual Meeting, Chicago, March 2001. A handful of dissertations have

by master Zhengyan 證嚴 (1937–), a renowned Buddhist nun hailed as “the Mother Teresa of Asia” and who has received several awards for contributions to world peace and disaster relief.<sup>6</sup> From its humble origins as a localized group of nuns and housewives in Hualian (eastern Taiwan), Ciji has blossomed into a formidable power extremely active on the religious and social scene in contemporary Taiwan.<sup>7</sup> Renowned for its ability to mobilize monumental funding and human resources, it claims no



Figure 2. Another Example of Sahā Triad

Images displayed in shop at Sanyi, Miaoli.

investigated the Ciji movement: see S. J. Chen, “Understanding the Buddhist Tzu-Chi Association: A Cultural Approach” (Ph.D. diss., U. Southern California, 1990); Jen-chieh Ting, “Helping Behavior in Social Context: A Case Study of Tzu-Chi [Ciji] Association in Taiwan” (Ph.D. diss., U. Wisconsin, Madison, 1997); C. H. Yang, “Tzu-Chi Buddhism Management Application to Small and Medium Size Real Estate Firms” (M.A. thesis, College of Management, Metropolitan State University, 1997); Chien-yu Julia Huang, “Recapturing Charisma: Emotion and Rationalization in a Globalizing Buddhist Movement from Taiwan” (Ph.D. diss., Boston U., 2001). Ciji has also figured in dissertation studies on Taiwanese culture, religion, and society; see Hwei-Syin Lu, “Self-growth, Women’s Power and the Contested Family Order in Taiwan: An Ethnographic Study of Three Contemporary Women’s Group” (Ph.D. diss., U. Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 1991); Meikuei Chen, “Buddhism in Taiwan: The Interactive Relationship Between Buddhism and Social Change” (M.A. thesis, U. Oregon, 1994); André Laliberté, “The Politics of Buddhist Organizations in Taiwan, 1989-1997” (Ph.D. diss., U. British Columbia, 1999). There also exists a significant output of Chinese scholarship, too extensive to be enumerated here; see, for instance Lu Huixin 盧蕙馨 (Hwei-Syin Lu), “Xiandai Fojiao nüxing de shenti yuyan yu xingbie chongjian: yi ciji gongdehui wei li” 現代佛教女性的身體語言與性別重建以慈濟功德會為例 (“Reconstruction of Contemporary Buddhism Women’s Body and Speech: The Example of Buddhist Compassion Relief Ciji Foundation”), *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan minzuxue yanjiusuo jikan* 中央研究院民族學研究所集刊 88 (2000), pp. 275–311.

<sup>6</sup> Besides the Philippines Magsaysay Prize (1991), she received the Huaxia Distinguished Award, an Honorary Doctorate Degree from the Hong Kong Chinese University, the Eisenhower International Peace Prize, Asia’s Most Outstanding Woman Award, and the Cultural Medallion from the Administrative Assembly of Taiwan. (See pamphlet, “Introduction of Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation, Singapore Branch 佛教慈濟慈善事業基金會.”) Most recently, she was awarded the Noel Foundation Life Award (2000); see *Tzu Chi USA Journal* 1.1 (Feb. 2002), p. 32.

<sup>7</sup> Under Zhengyan’s charismatic leadership, Ciji erected the first Buddhist hospital in Hualian (completed in 1986). A second hospital was completed in August, 2000, in the little town of Dalin 大林, located in Jiayi 嘉義 county in western Taiwan. In addition, Ciji has taken over the administration of other existing hospitals and has opened several free health clinics.

less than three to four million followers in Taiwan alone, not to speak of the many thousands of overseas Chinese. Since 1991, Ciji has further undertaken international relief work, and operates today as a global foundation with branch centers all over the world.<sup>8</sup>

This paper explores the origin and dissemination of the new triad configuration that the vendors of Buddhist images refer to as the Sahā Triad. It argues that the full significance is best understood within a larger trend called “Humanistic Buddhism 人間佛教,” which has evolved in modern Chinese Buddhism in the last century, and of which Ciji is but one, albeit prominent, strand. The study of the Sahā Triad ultimately sheds light on the use of iconic representation in a form of contemporary Buddhism that deemphasizes mythology and icon worship, insisting that bodhisattvas and buddhas are humanized figures, more to be emulated as models of behavior, than to be worshipped for miraculous efficacy. Interestingly, Ciji’s overt repudiation of image veneration does not necessarily preclude the use of icons in actual religious practice, and the movement accommodates a persistent strain of devotional expression through innovation in iconic representation.

Western scholarship in recent decades has witnessed a spurt of interest in the study of Buddhism in contemporary Taiwan, but this research has largely confined itself to institutional history, key thinkers, and major movements.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, I have investigated Taiwanese

<sup>8</sup> On the globalization of Ciji activities, see Chien-yu Julia Huang, “The Compassionate-Relief Diaspora,” paper presented at the “Globalization of Buddhism” Conference, Institute for the Study of Economic Culture, Boston University, April 22–23, 2000; revised version in her Ph.D. dissertation, “Recapturing Charisma,” pp. 178–205.

<sup>9</sup> A major contribution is the book-length publication, the first in English: Charles Brewer Jones, *Buddhism in Taiwan: Religion and the State 1660–1990* (U. of Hawai’i P., 1999). His work focuses on key Chinese Buddhist thinkers and institutional history in relation to the state. Also see his article, “Buddhism and Marxism in Taiwan: Lin Qiuwu’s Religious Socialism and Its Legacy in Modern Times,” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 1 (2000), pp. 82–111. Ciji and another Taiwanese Buddhist organization Foguang shan 佛光山, have received considerable attention from western scholars. For studies on Ciji, see above, n. 5; for Foguang shan, see Stuart Chandler, “Establishing the Pure Land on Earth: The Foguang Buddhist Perspective on Modernization and Globalization” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard U., 2000); “Globalizing Chinese Culture, Localizing Buddhist Teachings: The Internationalization of Foguangshan,” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 3 (2002), pp. 46–78. Finally master Yinshun, regarded by the tradition as the foremost thinker in modern Chinese Buddhism, has also attracted considerable scholarly attention: see Zhiru, “Chinese Master Yinshun’s Study of Indian Buddhism: Significance of Historical (Re)construction for a Contemporary Buddhist Thinker” (M.A. thesis, U. Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1993); Tien Po-Yao, “A Modern Buddhist Monk – Reformer in China: The Life and Thought of Yinshun” (Ph.D. diss., California Institute of Integral Studies, 1995); and most recently, Scott Christopher Hurley, “A Study of Master Yinshun’s Hermeneutics: An Interpretation of the Tathāgatagarbha Doctrine” (Ph.D. diss., U. Arizona, Tucson, 2001). Marcus Bingenheimer (University of Heidelberg) is also currently writing a dissertation on Yinshun. Departing from this focus on institutional and intellectual Buddhist history in Taiwan is Charles B. Jones, “Stages in the Religious Life of Lay Buddhists in Taiwan,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 20.2, pp. 113–39.

Buddhism *vis à vis* image representation, highlighting the Sahā Triad as a portal through which one glimpses the complex intertwining of various aspects of religion, from doctrine to practice, from the conceptual to the visual, from intellectual discourse to popular devotion, interacting with and molding one another to form a new religious development. The findings are principally based on field research in Taiwan and the extensive literature Ciji has published, although data from Ciji centers in Singapore and North America are employed where relevant.

### REASSESSING THE CIJI CONNECTION

At first glance, the shop assistants would appear to be correct in tracing the increasingly discernible trend of the Sahā Triad to Ciji. Not only is the trio of Śākyamuni, Dizang, and Guanyin enshrined in the main sanctuary of the Ciji headquarters in Hualian – the Still Thoughts Abode (Jingsi jingshe 靜思精舍; frequently referred to as “the Abode”), the residential monastery of master Zhengyan, but a similar triad arrangement is found in the nearby Still Thoughts Hall (Jingsi tang 靜思堂) completed in 1988. Several Ciji branch centers in Taiwan also have this triad configuration.<sup>10</sup> Initial and follow-up phone surveys of



*Figure 3. Sahā Triad Images at Ciji Monrovia Shrine*

*Monrovia (So. California) is headquarters for Ciji USA. This set is exactly the same in manufacture and size as those found in the main sanctuary of the Still Thoughts Abode at Hualian (eastern Taiwan), Ciji Foundation’s international headquarters.*

<sup>10</sup> Austin D. Tsao, oral interview, May 31, 2002.

the Ciji offices in North America listed in Ciji publications have indicated that the shrines of almost half of the centers or offices interviewed show this triad configuration.<sup>11</sup> (See figure 3 for one example.) As Austin D. Tsao, the chief executive officer of Ciji USA, points out, the triad is always enshrined as the object of devotion at a Ciji center or office, but where space does not allow for all three, one member of the trio is placed alone.<sup>12</sup> In short, the Sahā Triad appears to be the most common object of devotion found across Ciji branch centers in Taiwan and North America.

The triad configuration is not only found at Ciji centers, but has also made its way to personal shrines in the homes of Ciji followers. Alice Ho, a key member of Ciji Houston, reported that not only does their center display the triad configuration, but also several members in their domestic shrines.<sup>13</sup> A similar situation exists for Ciji in Cleveland.<sup>14</sup> Although Ciji Singapore did not enshrine the triad on its main altar, a set of the triad images was on display on the second floor of its building. One of the volunteers on duty at the counter explained that the exquisite set, engraved in hand-blown glass, was a gift bestowed by a patron donor, intended to be auctioned to raise money for Ciji activities. Another volunteer explained that the sale of hand-blown glass images of the triad has been crucial in the global efforts to raise funds for Ciji activities.<sup>15</sup> I visited the home of a Singapore Ciji follower who had such a set of the triad enshrined on his home altar (figure 4). At Yungang 雲崗, a shop in Singapore that sells Buddhist images, I came across a few sets of Sahā Triad images (figure 5).<sup>16</sup> Like his Taiwanese counterparts at Sanyi, the owner of the shop, Loh Teck Kar, stated that the Sahā Triad is a recent and growing phenomenon among Chinese Buddhists, associated especially with Ciji, although he was also quick to caution that Buddhists who acquire the Sahā Triad as a set were not always Ciji followers.<sup>17</sup> The findings thus far suggest that the worship of the Sahā Triad is dis-

<sup>11</sup> The initial survey was conducted in Oct., 2001, with a follow-up in Jan., 2002, to update the information. Admittedly, the accuracy of the oral interview is somewhat dependent on the informant's knowledge.

<sup>12</sup> Oral interview, May 31, 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Alice Ho is a very active member who regularly returns to the Hualian headquarters for training. She has been an important resource person for my project. She subsequently relocated to Washington at the end of the year 2001.

<sup>14</sup> Phone interview, October 2001.

<sup>15</sup> Oral interview, Dec. 30, 2001.

<sup>16</sup> I visited the shop first in August, 2001, and a second time in December, 2001. This is a small shop run by the owner himself. Retail business is fairly minimal, and the owner frequently sells goods through larger shops dealing in religious merchandise.

<sup>17</sup> Moreover, according to Loh, buyers, if they are so inclined, may also acquire only one member, rather than the entire set of the Sahā Triad images.

seminated largely among Ciji followers in Taiwan, as well as among overseas Chinese communities, although the trend also appears to have gradually filtered into a broader circle of Buddhists, not necessarily affiliated with Ciji.

Further investigation, however, reveals that whereas the trend of worshipping Śākyamuni, Guanyin, and Dizang has definite associations with the Ciji movement, the phrase “Sahā Triad” itself may not have been coined or promulgated by Ciji.

For one thing, the extensive body of literature produced by Ciji is conspicuously silent on the “Sahā Triad.” In an English glossary tract compiled and published by Ciji, which conveniently codifies key terminology of the organization, the definition of the three images worshiped at the Abode, the Ciji headquarters, is as follows:



*Figure 4. Sahā Triad on Household Shrine*

*Shrine belonging to Ciji follower, Singapore. Hand-blown glass miniature reproductions of Triad enshrined in main sanctuary at the Abode.*



*Figure 5. Example of Sahā Triad Images*

*Display in Buddhist merchandise store named Yungang, in the Hong Lim Complex at South Bridge Road (Singapore).*

*The Three Bodhisattvas in the Main Sanctuary of the Abode*

*Sakyamuni* [Śākyamuni] *Buddha*, the Fundamental Teacher for all Buddhists 釋迦牟尼佛. He was born 2,500 years ago in India. In search of truth, he left home at the age of thirty and became an ascetic. At the age of thirty-five, he attained enlightenment by realizing that the way to be released from the chains of rebirth and death lay not in asceticism but in moral purity. After that, he was known as the Buddha, which means the All-Enlightened One.

*Kuan Yin* [Guanyin], the Great Compassionate Bodhisattva 觀音. As the name shows, she is so compassionate that as soon as anybody cries for help, she will come to his aid. Although Kuan Yin was originally represented as a male, the images now generally show a female figure. She is the protector of all in distress.

*Earth Treasury* [Dizang] *Bodhisattva*, the Great Vow Bodhisattva 地藏王菩薩. He vowed to attain buddhahood only when all suffering souls were saved from hell. He also vowed to be enlightened only when all living beings were redeemed from misery of the world.<sup>18</sup>

In the above definition, no reference whatsoever is made to the Sahā Triad; nor, as far as I can determine, does the phrase occur in records of Zhengyan's sayings or teachings. Based on phone surveys of North American centers, only a handful of the informants are aware of the phrase, "Sahā Triad"; it would appear that the average Ciji follower is relatively unaware of this title for the triad.

Moreover, the reverend Dechen 德宸, the Ciji spokesman at the Hualian headquarters who handled all research queries, persistently ignored my repeated questions on the Sahā Triad, its first usage, and the extent of its proliferation among Ciji members. Dechen was quick to point out that Ciji does not promote any specific form of devotional worship, and that the spirit of Ciji is best represented by the form of Guanyin with the thousand arms and eyes.<sup>19</sup> Indeed this image of Guanyin is a metaphor that Zhengyan frequently employs to encourage her followers:

Legend goes that the Goddess of Mercy [Guanyin] has a thousand eyes watching over those in need of help  
And a thousand hands reaching out with love and mercy.

<sup>18</sup> *Tzu Chi Glossary*, p. 34.

<sup>19</sup> Written communication by e-mail, June 15, 2001.



We will become her watchful eyes and useful hands, and the  
 world can never call us Buddhists  
 A passive group again!<sup>20</sup>

The Chinese glossary of Ciji terminology contains a summation of the Ciji vision of the bodhisattva that specifically invokes the thousand-arm, thousand-eye Guanyin as the core symbolism of the bodhisattva ideal.<sup>21</sup> Admittedly this form of Guanyin appears to be the more dominant metaphor in Ciji discourse, certainly more so than the so-called Sahā Triad.

Given the focus on this Guanyin symbolism in the Ciji network, one would have to presume that the thousand-arm, thousand-eye Guanyin would be the object of devotion at Ciji centers, but there is no image of this particular form of Guanyin at the Ciji headquarters, nor at the overseas branches.<sup>22</sup> Instead, the trio of Śākyamuni, Guanyin, and Dizang is precisely the set of images enshrined at the Ciji headquarters, appearing the most frequently at branch centers in Taiwan and North America. The obvious question is why this choice of the triad, especially since the Ciji headquarters appear to be uncomfortable with the association with this form of Buddhist devotion as a gradually distinct religious trend in Taiwan? Also, if it is not the Ciji headquarters that coined the phrase “Sahā Triad,” who is responsible?

#### CIJI'S ATTITUDE TOWARD ICON WORSHIP

The discomfort of Ciji spokesmen concerning worship of the triad of Śākyamuni, Guanyin, and Dizang can be explained by the Ciji attitude toward icon worship that can ultimately be traced to the teachings of Zhengyan. Several Ciji informants I interviewed were quick to reiterate that Ciji followers are concerned with buddhas and bodhisattvas as “humanized 人化” figures meant for emulation, not as celestial divinities who perform miracles in response to the prayers of devotees. In the records of Zhengyan’s sayings and teachings, one immediately notices that the humanity of the Buddha and bodhisattvas is frequently highlighted, and there is in fact deliberate use of a discourse designed to repudiate icon worship.

<sup>20</sup> Yu-ing Ching, *Master of Love and Mercy: Cheng Yen* (Nevada City: Blue Dolphin Publishing, 1995), p. 60.

<sup>21</sup> See entry on Ciji pusa gang 慈濟菩薩綱 in Zhang Rongpan 張榮攀, ed., *Ciji yuhui 慈濟語彙 (Ciji Idioms)* (Taipei: Ciji Cultural Center, 1999), pp. 230–31.

<sup>22</sup> It is true that a few of the Ciji branches, such as Ciji Singapore, have a single image of Guanyin, but the image is generally not the thousand-arm, thousand-eye Guanyin.

Zhengyan, for instance, calls attention to the distinction between iconic representations and the “real” Buddha:

The wooden and stone buddhas and bodhisattvas in temples are not the real Buddha that can inspire us. They merely help calm us so we can concentrate our minds on the study of the teachings of Buddha. The truly inspiring Buddha can only be found in our hearts.<sup>23</sup>

In a similar vein, she reiterates:

A bodhisattva is not a carved wooden image. A real bodhisattva is a kind person who can work, speak, and eat.<sup>24</sup>

It is precisely the humanity of the Buddha that, for Zhengyan, sets him apart from gods:

Buddha is not a god. However, all living beings in the world have the buddha-nature. The Buddha has transcended his human nature and become a saint. He is the most respected of those who are enlightened and who enlighten others. He is the guide of true human life.<sup>25</sup>

In her teachings, there is no question that religious piety is regarded to be of less value than good works, particularly actions that relieve suffering and benefit others. Comparing the Buddhist who acts like the Buddha to those who worship the Buddha, or those who believe in the Buddha, she unequivocally states that only one who acts like the Buddha is “the true Buddhist.”<sup>26</sup> In one of her rare direct references to Śākyamuni, Guanyin, and Dizang together, she proclaims:

I'll grasp your courage, my fearless Buddha!  
And I'll imitate your endurance, my Goddess of Mercy [Guanyin]!  
I'll also assimilate your bravery, my Guardian of Earth  
[Dizang] who is always unafraid!<sup>27</sup>

In other words, images of the three saints, for Zhengyan, are intended to inspire models of behavior, symbolizing the spirit of fearless courage and adamant endurance that Ciji followers are supposed to emulate in their self-sacrificing work to benefit human society.

<sup>23</sup> Cheng Yen [Zhengyan], *Still Thoughts*, trans. Liu King-pong (Taipei: Still Thoughts Cultural Publishing, 1996) 2, p. 19.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 2, p. 17.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 2, p. 186.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 2, p. 187.

<sup>27</sup> Ching, *Master of Love and Mercy*, p. 206.

The Ciji attitude toward image veneration is perhaps best encapsulated in a recorded exchange between the author of a book on Zhengyan and a Ciji follower that took place in the main sanctuary of the Abode at Hualian:

... my eyes met the eyes of the silver-haired lady kneeling next to me. She smiled at me, and the lines on her thin face deepened. She whispered, "You are new here, I know. If you have any questions, I'll be happy to help, if I can."

I glanced back at the altars, and a question suddenly rose to my mind. "There are three large statues. And I thought that the Master does not believe in worshiping idols."

The ancient lady's voice was low but clear, "The definition of 'idol' is: an image or statue worshiped as a god. We Buddhists here do not believe that Sakyamuni [Śākyamuni], Kwan-yin [Guanyin], and Ti-tsang [Dizang] are gods."

She paused, coughed softly, then went on, "According to Master Cheng Yen's teaching, the word Buddha comes from the word Budhi [sic], which means 'to wake up.' Thus Buddha is a person who is awake, and Buddhism is the philosophy of awakening. Even in a more sophisticated sense, Buddha still means either The Saint or The Enlightened One, but never God. The Buddhists are not god-worshippers, but people determined to enlighten themselves and become wide awake."

She looked at me, as if trying to find out whether I was still listening. Seeing that she had captured my full attention, she continued, "Sakyamuni was an Indian prince. He realized the insignificance of our mundane existence and the constant round of reincarnations. He sat in contemplation for many years until he discovered that by living a moral and useful life one can erase his negative Karma and reach nirvana where all sufferings are extinct and all beings are transported across the bitter sea of mortality.

"Sakyamuni advised people to wake up from the worldly dreams in which they were dwelling but never asked his followers to accept any of his preaching by blind faith. To true Buddhists, a theory must make sense, or it is not worth believing.

"And also to the true Buddhists, Kwan-yin was the daughter of a king. She has done many good deeds and is known as either the Goddess of Mercy or the Protector of All in Distress. Ti-tsang was a Korean monk who came to China and helped the suffering people, and he is referred to as the Guardian of Earth. There are

all sorts of mythological tales about Sakyamuni, Kwan-yin and Ti-tsang, but those tales are not rooted in the hearts of the true Buddhists.

“Only a true Buddhist can understand that Sakyamuni, Kwan-yin and Ti-tsang were but three of the physical forms that housed the true nature of selfless love, mercy, compassion, justice, kindness and wisdom. All of us can strive for enlightenment. Once enlightened, you and I can be just like Sakyamuni, Kwan-yin, and Ti-tsang.

“And I’m sure you can see now that we are definitely not idol-worshippers.”<sup>28</sup>

Although the above view of image worship is articulated by a follower, one can presume that the attitudes are representative of Ciji and can be traced to Zhengyan. There is an obvious eagerness to demythologize the pantheon of Buddhist saints, and to appeal to them especially as *human* incarnations who have lived in this world. We witness an interesting exegetical strategy in the appeal to the human incarnations of Guanyin and Dizang as evidence of the bodhisattvas’ humanity – an innovative departure from the traditional interpretation. If we examine Buddhist history, we find that the legends of Guanyin’s incarnation as Princess Miaoshan and that of Dizang as the Korean prince arose in China in part as efforts to sinicize and localize the two bodhisattva cults within the sinitic geographical landscape.<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, the legends were originally intended to further cultic devotion of the two bodhisattvas, laying down the mythological basis for localized pilgrimage sites for the two cults. However, in the Ciji treatment, these legends are presumed to be historical facts and are deployed to advance the argument

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 46–47.

<sup>29</sup> For a book-length study on the development of the myth of Miaoshan, see Glenn Dudbridge, *The Legend of Miao-shan* (London: Ithaca, 1978); also see Chün-fang Yü, *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteśvara* (New York: Columbia U.P., 2001), pp. 293–351. On the Miaoshan legend as the mythological basis for Guanyin pilgrimage in China, see Chün-fang Yü, “P’u-t’o Shan: Pilgrimage and the Creation of the Chinese Potalaka,” in Susan Naquin and Chün-fang Yü, eds., *Pilgrims and Sacred Sites in China* (Berkeley: U. California P., 1992), pp. 190–245; reprinted in Yü, *Kuan-yin*, pp. 353–406.

The legend of Dizang’s incarnation as a Korean prince transformed Mt. Jiuhua into a pilgrimage center for Dizang worship; see Jiuhua shan Fojiao shi bianweihui 九華山佛教史編委會, eds., *Jin dizang yanjiu* 金地藏研究 (*Studies on the Golden Dizang*) (Hefei: Huangshan shushe, 1993), and *Jin dizang yanjiu xuzi* 金地藏研究續集 (*Further Studies on the Golden Dizang*) (Hefei: Huangshan shushe, 1996). For studies in English, see William Powell, “Mt. Jiuhua: The Nine-Florate Realm of Dizang Pusa,” *Asian Cultural Studies* 16 (1987), pp. 116–30; Françoise Wang-Toutain, “The Fate of the Venerable Jin Dizang from the Korean Monk to the Bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha,” paper presented at the Association of Asian Studies Annual Conference, Chicago, 2001.

that these bodhisattvas are human ideals to be revered as such. Given the Ciji emphasis on buddhas and bodhisattvas as humanized ideals to be realized in the everyday context, it is not surprising that the Ciji headquarters is reluctant to be associated with image veneration, or to assume any role in the growing popularity of the Sahā Triad as a new devotional trend in contemporary Taiwan.

#### THE SAHĀ TRIAD AS ICONIC REPRESENTATION OF HUMANISTIC BUDDHISM

The full import of the recent appearance of the Sahā Triad can be unraveled only when placed in context within the larger development of Humanistic Buddhism in contemporary Taiwan. As deployed in this paper, “Humanistic Buddhism” is an umbrella term encompassing a set of Buddhist concepts appearing frequently in modern Chinese Buddhist discourse, most prominent of which are “Buddhism for the Human Realm 人間佛教,” “Earthly Pure Land 人間淨土,” and “This-worldly Bodhisattva 人間菩薩.” These teachings are designed to reorient Chinese Buddhism away from its traditional “unhealthy” focus on death, afterlife, and otherworldly concerns to this very world in which we live.<sup>30</sup> Humanistic Buddhist ideals are usually traced to Taixu 太虛 (1890–1947), the monk-reformer who lived through the turmoils of the collapse of imperial China,<sup>31</sup> and his successor, the scholar-monk Yinshun 印順 (1906–), who fled to Taiwan during the Communist takeover of China.<sup>32</sup> It should, however, be reiterated that the widespread

<sup>30</sup> Taixu critiques traditional Chinese Buddhist emphasis on “the Buddhism of the dead 死的佛教” and “the Buddhism of ghosts 鬼的佛教”; he promulgates the doctrine of “Buddhism for Human Life 人生佛教” as a corrective to these tendencies; see Guo Peng 郭朋, *Taixu dashi sixiang yanjiu* 太虛大師思想研究 (Taipei: Yuanming, 1996), p. 477. Critical of Buddhist focus on remote otherworldly realms, most evident in Pure Land and esoteric practices, Yinshun coined the concept of *renjian Fojiao* 人間佛教 (Buddhism for the human realm), promoting practice and attainment of enlightenment in the human realm, as opposed to other realms of rebirth; see Yinshun, *Qili qiji zhi renjian Fojiao* 契理契機之人間佛教 (*A Buddhism in the Human Realm Adapted to Rationality and Disposition*) (Taipei: Zhengwen, 1989), p. 46; also see Yang Huinan 楊惠南, “Cong rensheng Fojiao dao renjian Fojiao” 從人生佛教到人間佛教 (“From Buddhism for the Human Life to Buddhism in the Human Realm”), in *Dangdai Fojiao sixiang zhanwang* 當代佛教思想展望 (*The Development of Contemporary Buddhist Thought*) (Taipei: Dongda, 1991), pp. 75–125.

<sup>31</sup> On Taixu’s reformative teachings, see the 62-volume series: Yinshun, ed., *Taixu dashi quanshu* 太虛大師全書 (*The Complete Works of Master Taixu*) (Taipei, 1953); for a book-length study on Taixu in English, see Don A. Pittman, *Toward a Modern Chinese Buddhism: Taixu’s Reforms* (Honolulu: U. of Hawai’i P., 2001).

<sup>32</sup> Yinshun was not a tonsure disciple of Taixu, but studied at one of the Buddhist seminaries set up by Taixu. Yinshun quickly emerged as a precocious pupil and began teaching at Taixu’s seminaries after only a year. This student-turned-lecturer is widely respected today in Taiwan as the foremost Chinese Buddhist thinker. Seeing himself as an intellectual reformer, he has authored a massive body of Buddhist writings to promote Humanistic Buddhism, and

popularization of Humanistic Buddhism evident in Taiwan today only occurred in the decades since the 1980s, a time when the flowering of independent Buddhist organizations challenged the hegemony of the Buddhist Association of the Republic of China.<sup>33</sup> The new forms of Buddhism appropriated and disseminated Humanistic Buddhist ideals, offering divergent formulas for adherents to realize the bodhisattva path right here and now by creating a better society for all beings.<sup>34</sup> This desire to establish a Pure Land on earth has become one of the hallmarks of contemporary Buddhism in Taiwan, and Ciji's advocacy of Buddhist charity is one design for the creation of a this-worldly Pure Land. Ciji in fact can be regarded as having effectively translated a Buddhist intellectual trend into a popular movement with a broad appeal across different strata of society.<sup>35</sup>

One of the several conduits through which Ciji has achieved a widespread dissemination of Humanistic Buddhist ideals is the generation of a flood of visual imagery that facilitates the naturalization and popularization of theological concepts.<sup>36</sup> By transforming abstruse

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provide canonical authority for it. While some of his works are intended to be scholarly reconstructions of Buddhist history, his views are more widely circulated through the 24-volume series titled *Miaoyun ji* 妙雲集 (*A Collection of Wondrous Clouds*) (Taipei: Zhengwen, 1973). His *Qili qiji zhi renjian Fojiao* (previous n.) offers a succinct statement on Humanistic Buddhism. For his promotion of Humanistic Buddhism, see Shi Zhaohui 釋昭慧, *Renjian Fojiao de bozhong zhe* 人間佛教的播種者 (*The Sower of the Seeds of a Humanistic Buddhism*) (Taipei: Dongda, 1995). Concerning Yinshun, see also the works cited n. 9, above.

<sup>33</sup> This is precisely the phase of Taiwanese Buddhism that Charles B. Jones calls "the period of pluralization," the years following the lifting of the Martial Law in 1987, and the improvisation of the 1989 Revised Law on the Organization of Civic Groups. See Jones, *Buddhism in Taiwan*, pp. 178–218; for related discussion, also see his earlier writing, "Relations between the Nationalist Government and the Buddhist Association of the Republic of China (BAROC) since 1945," *Journal of Chinese Religions* 24 (1996), pp. 77–99. Besides Ciji, two other Buddhist organizations became very popular in Taiwan around this period too: Foguang shan, or Buddha Light Mountain, headed by Xingyun 星雲 (1927–), and Fagu shan 法鼓山, or Dharma Drum Mountain, founded by the Chan master Shengyan 聖嚴 (1930–).

<sup>34</sup> On the roots of the modern Chinese Buddhist pursuit of the Earthly Pure Land, see Jiang Canteng 江燦騰, *Renjian jingtu de zhuixun: Zhongguo jinshi Fojiao sixiang yanjiu* 人間淨土的追尋—中國近世佛教思想研究 (*The Pursuit of the Earthly Pure Land: A Study of Contemporary Chinese Buddhist Thought*) (Taipei: Daoxiang, 1989); and idem, "Taiwan dangdai jingtu sixiang de xin dongxiang: sixiang shi de tantao" 台灣當代淨土思想的新動向—思想史的探討 ("The New Tendency in Pure Land thought in Contemporary Taiwan: An Investigation of Intellectual History"), *Dongfang zongjiao yanjiu* 東方宗教研究 2 (1988), pp. 163–84.

<sup>35</sup> It is important, however, to reiterate that Zhengyan's vision of Buddhism is certainly not an exact copy of Yinshun's views, although there are certainly conspicuous parallels. Zhengyan's view of Humanistic Buddhism, for instance, incorporates the Confucian model of family ethics to an extent not found in Yinshun's works.

<sup>36</sup> Besides the generation of visual imagery, Ciji is responsible for other means of popularizing Humanistic Buddhism. Its undertaking of social welfare, for instance, is a modern tool to achieve Humanistic Buddhism; this crucial aspect of Ciji has already been well studied (see n. 5). Zhengyan, moreover, is known for her adroit skill in coining pithy maxims and cogent proverbs that effectively communicate the Ciji vision of Humanistic Buddhism to a large and diverse following.

doctrines into tangible material forms, religious visual culture eases the cognitive process of apprehending, identifying, and remembering the sacred. In Taiwan, Ciji leads other Buddhist organizations in the use of popular visual media to propagate Humanistic Buddhism, from note cards and bookmarks to the internet and satellite television. Within this larger context of an incessant production of visual imagery, it can be argued that the Sahā Triad serves as the key iconic representation of the Humanistic Buddhism that Ciji has integrated into the core of its Buddhist vision.

The placement of Śākyamuni, Dizang, and Guanyin on the main shrine of the Still Thoughts Abode at Hualian was originally prompted by Zhengyan's own devotional preferences. Despite Ciji's emphatic disclaimer that it does not promote devotionism, a quick perusal of Zhengyan's biography immediately reveals a strong devotional strain in her early religious career. As a young girl of fifteen, she prayed to Guanyin to relieve her mother from an ailment, vowing to sacrifice twelve years of her own lifespan and to become a vegetarian in exchange for her mother's recovery; for three nights consecutively, she dreamt of Guanyin dispensing medication to her ailing mother.<sup>37</sup> When she began her religious vocation and first came to Puming si 普明寺 (Universal Light Monastery) in Xiulin 秀林 county (eastern Hualian), the place that would later become the headquarters for the global Ciji network, Zhengyan immediately recognized this as the site of her dreams where Guanyin had delivered medication to her mother. Her extreme acts of filial piety linked her naturally to the bodhisattva Dizang who, according to *Dizang pusa benyuan jing* 地藏菩薩本願經 (*Scripture on the Past Vows of Bodhisattva Dizang*), in two of his past lives was a paradigmatic filial daughter who braved the depths of hells in search of her deceased mother.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, Dizang was the patron saint of Puming si, where Zhengyan stayed after she ran away from home in search of a religious life. It was only natural that when she finally set up the Abode in Hualian, she should have elected to enshrine Dizang and Guanyin as the bodhisattvas in the main sanctuary. Triad configuration has always been the most popular shrine arrangement in Buddha halls, and to complete the triad, Zhengyan added Buddha Śākyamuni in the center. The choice of Śākyamuni may have to do with Zheng-

<sup>37</sup> Chen Huijian 陳慧劍, *Zhengyan fashi de Ciji shijie* 證嚴法師的慈濟世界 (Taipei, 1983, rpt. 1998), pp. 5–6. Her mother evidently recovered without undergoing surgery.

<sup>38</sup> *T* no. 412, vol. 13, pp. 778B–781B.

yan's connection with Yinshun, whom she recognizes as her religious teacher;<sup>39</sup> she may have been inspired by his vision of Humanistic Buddhism that is centered on the historical Buddha Śākyamuni as opposed to the other mythological Buddhas. She would subsequently appropriate this Humanistic Buddhism as the doctrinal framework for her vision of Buddhist altruism.

Not incidentally, Śākyamuni, Dizang, and Guanyin are salient members of the East Asian Buddhist pantheon to whom the Chinese audience barely needs introduction. Deeply embedded in the popular religious consciousness of Sinitic milieus, the three figures constitute a familiar visual symbolism to which Chinese Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike can easily identify and respond. As objects of popular devotion, Dizang and Guanyin are worshipped largely as superhuman otherworldly beings who miraculously assist their devotees in times of trouble. Guanyin is exceedingly well known to the Chinese audience in her numerous manifestations and encompassing roles that traverse the boundaries of religious denominations.<sup>40</sup>

Dizang is especially popular for his specialized function as the Lord of the Dark Realm 冥界教主, who oversees the welfare of the dead.<sup>41</sup> This image of Dizang possesses, however, a double edge, so that while believers look forward to his mitigation in postmortem judgment, at the same time they fear his presence because of his association with the inauspicious world of death and the dark terrors of the subterranean realm. Consequently, although Dizang is only next in popularity to Guanyin in Chinese Buddhism, he significantly lags behind Guanyin as the devotional focus for household shrines, figuring more commonly instead in separate memorial cloisters for the dead in temples and monasteries.<sup>42</sup> This reluctance to integrate Dizang into the domestic setting

<sup>39</sup> It is said that Zhengyan was refused official ordination by the Buddhist Association, because she had tonsured herself. Yinshun agreed to sponsor her ordination as her official tonsure teacher and urged that she commit herself to "humanize the Buddhist teachings and bring the bodhisattvas into this world." Ciji followers hold these words as one of the inspirations for their mission. See "Editorial: Act Like the Bodhisattvas," *Tzu Chi Quarterly* (Summer 2000), p. 1; cf. Dharma Master Zhengyan, *Three Ways to the Pure Land*, trans. Lin Sen-shou (Taipei: Tzu Chi Cultural Publishing Co., 2001), p. 58.

<sup>40</sup> In the popular religious milieu, Guanyin is regarded as the Goddess of Mercy, whose identity merges with non-Buddhist female deities, such as Mazu 媽祖 and Queen Mother of the West (Xiwangmu 西王母).

<sup>41</sup> Hailed as the "[Bodhisattva] King Dizang (Dizang wang [pusa] 地藏王[菩薩])" in the popular religious milieu, he deals out postmortem judgment, presiding over the underworld courts together with the Ten Kings of Purgatory. Early artistic renditions of this afterlife judgment occurs from the ninth century onwards, appearing quite frequently in paintings over the ceiling of passageways in the Mogao caves at Dunhuang.

<sup>42</sup> The memorial cloisters are often called Dizang Cloister (Dizang yuan 地藏院), but may have more generic names like Memorial Hall (Huai'en tang 懷恩堂).



stems from popular taboos concerning the contamination of death, and the need for the segregation of the living from the dead.<sup>43</sup> As patron saint of the dead, Dizang thus represents precisely those mortuary and postmortem rites that Taixu abhorred and regarded as the cause of the decline of Chinese Buddhism. The incorporation of Dizang into the this-worldly vision of Ciji Buddhism is ironic, but his transformation from an afterlife deity into a this-worldly bodhisattva is perhaps not as radical as it seems.<sup>44</sup> All three members of the Sahā Triad have natural associations with the Sahā World that we live in: Śākyamuni is the Teacher and Buddha of this Sahā World;<sup>45</sup> Dizang is the bodhisattva who watches over living beings during the interval when the world is without a Buddha;<sup>46</sup> and Guanyin is depicted in numerous scriptures as assisting living beings of this world.<sup>47</sup> The very name, “Sahā Triad,” intentionally highlights the this-worldly geography as the trio’s sphere of activity and influence.

As suggested previously, the Ciji headquarters does not appear to be responsible for having coined the phrase “Sahā Triad,” and Ciji spokesmen at the Hualian headquarters in fact shy from the usage or discussion of this terminology. This nomenclature may well have originated among purveyors of Buddhist images, since it is precisely this class of specialists, rather than Ciji members, who employ it most consistently. Retailers and vendors specializing in the purchase and

<sup>43</sup> Fear of the dead returning as disembodied spirits to haunt the living is a perennial Chinese theme, leading to preoccupation with funerary rituals and proper erection and sealing of the tomb, to ensure that the dead will never return to the world of the living. This anxiety is reflected, for instance, in literary documents ranging from religious texts for quelling ghosts and demons, to funerary contracts that legally bind the dead to their sealed enclosures. See Angela Cedzich, “Ghosts and Demons, Law and Order: Grave Quelling Texts and Early Taoist Liturgy,” *Daoist Resources* 4.2 (1993), pp. 23–35; Valerie Hansen, “Contracting with the Gods,” in *Negotiating Daily Life in Traditional China: How Ordinary People Used Contracts 600–1400* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1995), pp. 149–229.

<sup>44</sup> The association of Dizang with the Sahā World has precedent in Chinese Buddhist history. In Sanjie jiao 三階教 (Teaching of the Three Levels) discourse, a short-lived Buddhist movement around the seventh century, Dizang is invoked as the head of the bodhisattvas of *this* world, the assistant of the Buddha Śākyamuni, in contrast to other bodhisattvas who preside over realms outside of this world. See *Sanjie Fofa* 三階佛法, attributed to Xinxing 信行 (540–594 AD), Dunhuang manuscript S 2084, edited in Yabuki Keiki 矢吹慶輝, *Sangaikyō no kenkyū* 三階教の研究 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1927), appendices, p. 15.

<sup>45</sup> In Chinese Buddhist liturgies, the Buddha Śākyamuni is frequently hailed as “the original teacher 本師.”

<sup>46</sup> In *Dizang pusa benyuan jing* 地藏菩薩本願經 (*Scripture on the Past Vows of the Bodhisattva Dizang*), the Buddha entrusted Dizang with the welfare of living beings in the Sahā World until the advent of Maitreya; see *T* no. 412, vol. 13, p. 779B–C.

<sup>47</sup> For example, chapter 25 of the *Lotus Sūtra*, titled “Chapter on the Universal Gate of the Bodhisattva Who Contemplates the Sounds of the World” (“Guanshiyin pusa pumen pin” 觀世音菩薩普門品), which also circulates independently as the *Guanyin Sūtra* (*Guanyin jing* 觀音經).

sale of Buddhist images may have been faced with the practical need to label the triad of Śākyamuni, Guanyin, and Dizang that was attracting an increasing market, no doubt catalyzed by the booming popularity of the Ciji movement. They probably needed a convenient and “catchy” designation of reference for purposes of cataloging, ordering, and other trade communications. Identifying the this-worldly thrust of Ciji’s vision with the triad symbolism, image vendors may have coined the phrase “Sahā Triad,” so as to parallel the names of existing Chinese Buddhist triads, such as the exceedingly popular “Triad of the Western Direction,” mentioned earlier, and the lesser known “Huayan Triad 華嚴三聖” presiding over the Flower Repository World 華藏世界.<sup>48</sup>

Evolving rapidly from a regional to a national movement, and ultimately emerging as a global network, Ciji faces the need to foster an identity that traverses cultural, ethnic, geographical, and social boundaries. Reduplication of Ciji’s material and visual culture, especially as experienced at the Hualian headquarters, has thus become one of several channels for the perpetuation of the Ciji identity. This is not the place to enter into extended discussion of the subject; suffice it to say that within the production and transportation of Ciji material and visual culture, the Sahā Triad circulates as Ciji’s representative iconography. It is not too difficult to conceive why the Sahā Triad, rather than the thousand-arm, thousand-eye Guanyin, should function as the key iconic symbolism for Ciji, even though the latter is more frequently invoked as representative of Ciji’s spirit of altruism. An obvious practical reason is that it is the Sahā Triad, not this Guanyin, that was originally enshrined in the Buddha Hall of the Abode, so that it is naturally the Sahā Triad that is disseminated as a prominent element of the material and visual culture at the Hualian headquarters. More significantly, it requires precisely the coming together of all three members of the Sahā Triad, not just Guanyin alone, to communicate visually the this-worldly orientation of Humanistic Buddhism that is so fundamental to the Ciji vision. Just as it is imperative to consider intertextuality in the construction of the meaning of written texts, it is also essential to speak of dialectical interplays among visual images in the formation of visual meaning. The Sahā Triad can function as an effective iconic representation of Humanistic Buddhism precisely because, as visual imagery, it conjures the necessary associations in the religious consciousness

<sup>48</sup> Triad of the Western Direction was mentioned at the beginning of this article. The Huayan Triad consists of the Buddha Vairocana, and the bodhisattvas Samantabhadra and Mañjuśrī; see Robert M. Gimello, “Ch’eng-kuan on the Hua-yen Trinity,” *Zhonghua Foxue xuebao* 中華佛學學報 9 (1996), pp. 341–411.

of the viewer, those visual reinforcements and contrasts necessary for apprehending the Sahā Triad. Only the specific configuration of the Sahā Triad, not merely Guanyin imagery, will evoke a visual parallel to the Triad of the Western Direction, with its afterlife overtones and remote distance from this world. The (unconscious or subconscious) mental conjuration of the Amitābha Pure Land triad provides the necessary contextual contrast for highlighting the this-worldly imagery of the Sahā Triad.

It is significant to realize that the emergence of the Sahā Triad denotes the beginning of a critical phase in the implementation of Humanistic Buddhism in Taiwan – the encoding of this teaching into iconic symbolism that can be deployed for devotional purposes. Functioning as the visual imagery that concretizes and translates the discourse of Humanistic Buddhism into material objects of religious piety, the Sahā Triad enables Humanistic Buddhism to penetrate the practical dimension of popular Buddhist worship, even while its discourse intentionally and overtly subordinates image veneration and devotional practices. Devotion is an integral aspect of religious life that cannot be easily obliterated; its presence is reflected in the very architecture of the Chinese Buddhist monastery that always contains a principal shrine hall, the site of daily devotional offerings and practices. The Still Thoughts Abode adheres to the daily monastic schedule typical of Chinese Buddhism that includes regular liturgical ceremonies held in the main sanctuary. Even at the overseas Ciji branches, which are run by laypeople rather than monastics, the practice of making devotional offerings to the Sahā Triad is often observed, not to speak of regular observances of ritual chanting at those centers that have the space for these activities. In other words, although the Ciji vision of Buddhist practice gives priority to social activism in the form of altruistic practices, devotional expression is not completely rejected, but is accommodated with new objects of piety. Whether or not it is explicitly promoted for this purpose, the Sahā Triad ultimately functions as the iconic representation through which the ideals of Humanistic Buddhism can take form as material objects of religious piety, offering a new focus of Buddhist devotion contrasting with the Pure Land worship of the Triad of the Western Direction.

The situation is comparable in some sense to aspects of Protestant Christianity. In a study of Protestant uses of visual imagery, the art historian David Morgan has shown that despite the official stance against the use of religious images as a form of idolatry, Protestants

persist in deploying popular religious images in church and especially household settings:

While Protestant churches are widely decorated with stained glass imagery or inexpensive reproductions of pictures of Jesus by such artists as Heinrich Hofmann and Warner Sallman ... the much more common site for images among conservative American Protestants has been the home ...<sup>49</sup>

In the same vein, Ciji, as a strand of Humanistic Buddhism, interprets Buddhism in an age when many intellectuals posit a demythologized universe. It emphasizes the buddhas and bodhisattvas as models of behavior to be emulated, yet, despite its evident subordination of image veneration, the Sahā Triad allows Ciji to accommodate devotional expression within the fold of Humanistic Buddhism.

## CONCLUSION

This study began by discussing the recent appearance of the Sahā Triad in the market of Buddhist images, first exploring its stipulated association with Ciji, and then linking it also to the larger trend of Humanistic Buddhism flourishing in contemporary Taiwan. The Sahā Triad is certainly found at the Ciji headquarters in Hualian, and also appears fairly frequently at Ciji branches in and outside of Taiwan; this otherwise apparent connection is, however, complicated by Ciji's reticence concerning the emergence of the Sahā Triad as an increasingly distinct strand of Buddhist devotion in Taiwan. This ambivalence can, however, be explained by Ciji's overt subordination, and at times even repudiation, of image veneration, as part of the rhetoric of the this-worldly and demythologizing tendencies of Humanistic Buddhism to which Ciji subscribes. Use of the Sahā Triad as a representative iconography for Ciji may be attributed to its rapid expansion, which necessitates the widespread reduplication of a representative material and visual religious culture as one medium for the maintenance and reinforcement of religious identity. Presiding over the main sanctuary of the Abode, the triad is a conspicuous component of the visual culture at the Hualian headquarters, a natural visual imagery. More

<sup>49</sup> David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Ideas* (Berkeley: U. of California P., 1998), p. 153; idem, "Imaging Protestant Piety: The Icons of Warner Sallman," *Religion and American Culture* 3.1 (1993), pp. 29-47; and idem, "Protestant Visual Practice and American Mass Culture," in Stewart M. Hoover and Lynn Schofield Clark, eds., *Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media: Explorations in Media, Religion, and Culture* (New York: Columbia U.P., 2002), pp. 35-62.

significantly, however, the triad simultaneously functions as an appropriate iconic representation of Humanistic Buddhism, communicating visually its this-worldly orientation. The triad ultimately signifies, I argue, an important phase in the popularization of Humanistic Buddhism, the materialization of its teachings into iconic objects that can be deployed for devotional expression.

I should reiterate that my endeavor to contextualize the appearance of the Sahā Triad within the larger trend of Humanistic Buddhism certainly does not indicate any prioritization of doctrinal development over the domain of the visual.<sup>50</sup> Rather, this study, I believe, throws light on the diverse components of religion that are involved in a complicated fabric of interconnections shaping religious visual meaning and the formation of a new expression of Buddhist devotion. It is obvious that text and doctrine alone cannot always explain iconic symbolism. The Sahā Triad, one should recall, did not originate as a deliberate religious innovation of Zhengyan, or the Ciji movement she founded. Arising, instead, from the personal devotional preferences of Zhengyan, this iconic configuration reflects the dominance of Guanyin and, to a lesser extent, Dizang devotion in the popular milieu. With Ciji's appropriation of the teachings of Humanistic Buddhism as the doctrinal rationale for its vision of Buddhist altruism, the configuration of Śākyamuni flanked by Dizang and Guanyin likely took on a special significance that was not originally intended; the triad became, in this fashion, the iconic representation of the this-worldly thrust so rudimentary to the vision of Humanistic Buddhism. Its designation as "Sahā Triad" certainly refocuses the visual imagery to highlight its this-worldly symbolism. The compelling appellation, I suggest, may have been coined by retailers and traders engaged in the sale and purchase of religious images. If this speculation is accurate, then we are privileged to a rare glimpse of a neglected component in the contextual dynamics that shape the formation of a devotional trend. The impact of this class of trade specialists on Buddhist devotional art has been largely unstudied, and needs to be reevaluated.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>50</sup> The problems encountered in the emphasis of textual authority for interpreting Buddhist art are discussed by Robert H. Sharf, "Prolegomenon to the Study of Japanese Buddhist Icons," in Robert H. Sharf and Elizabeth Horton Sharf, *Living Images: Japanese Buddhist Icons in Context* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 2001), pp. 5-7.

<sup>51</sup> However, studies on Christianity in America have recently begun to explore religious retailing: e.g., Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1995), pp. 222-69; R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford U.P., 1994).

In naming the icon “Sahā Triad,” the trade specialists of Buddhist images may have recognized its this-worldly orientation, but they do not necessarily perceive its function in exactly the same light as Ciji leaders. From oral interviews, it is evident that the majority of the sellers of religious images perceive the Sahā connection largely as a geographical contrast with the otherworldly location of the Triad of the Western Direction. The Sahā Triad images, for them, still represent supernatural celestial beings, who are in every sense otherworldly except for their geographical location; rarely do they speak of the images as models of perfected behavior to be emulated by the believers. One would suspect that a significant percentage of the devotees who install this triad in their household shrines also share this view. It is important to realize the diversity within the fold of Ciji believers, and the pluralism of perspectives on the function of images, which may range from skeptical iconoclasm,<sup>52</sup> reconciliatory veneration of images as models of behavior,<sup>53</sup> or unabashed emphasis on the miraculous power of images.<sup>54</sup> Arising from popular devotional trends, this triad became a systematized iconic representation under the auspices of Ciji; it was further named Sahā Triad, a title which was coined likely during the transaction processes of buying and selling images, but which evidently has not gained wide currency.

The new triad icon can only be a boon to the market of religious images in Taiwan. On the one hand, it attracts a sizeable new market of Ciji followers who have sought to follow, or reduplicate, the devotional pattern of the Abode within the localized contexts of branch centers and household shrines. The glass statues mentioned previously (figure 4), for instance, make use of the alternate media of hand-blown glass to produce miniature replicas of the “original” images enshrined in the Abode. Manufactured to generate funds for Ciji’s charitable activities, these glass statues have certainly contributed to the circulation of the triad for devotional use within the household domain. This image re-

<sup>52</sup> The iconoclastic attitude is especially prevalent among young Taiwanese immigrant professionals who volunteer at the branch centers in the U.S.A., particularly at Ciji Milpitas in northern California. One of these informants, Wang Ching-Jyh, a computer specialist, considers the practice of charity as the quintessence of Ciji’s mission, dismissing images and all devotional behavior as “religious superstition” (oral interview, June 25, 2002).

<sup>53</sup> This attitude is generally adopted by Ciji leaders who are actively involved in the activities of the organization and have undergone considerable education at the Ciji headquarters. An example is Alice Ho, discussed in n. 13.

<sup>54</sup> Many Ciji followers appeal to different functions of religious images according to changes in their circumstances. For instance, a Ciji follower who may usually invoke the official stance that buddhas and bodhisattvas are “humanized figures” to be emulated rather than worshipped, will in times of family or personal crisis appeal to the images as superhuman saviors.

production of the “original” enshrined in the Abode has obvious parallels with the reduplication of efficacious statues or pictures, a religious practice that frequently accompanies image veneration.<sup>55</sup> On the other hand, the new triad icon will also attract potential buyers of religious images who may have little, or no affiliation with Ciji. Given the popularity of Dizang and Guanyin in Chinese religion, the opportunity to worship the two simultaneously must be rather appealing to Taiwanese seeking divine protection. In the new iconic configuration, Dizang is represented, along with Guanyin, as the attendant bodhisattva of Buddha Śākyamuni, thereby shifting the emphasis from his ominous association with the dead to his identity as the great bodhisattva who will never forsake this world, not even the dead of this world. As a member of this new triad, Dizang can now be welcomed without reservation into the domestic setting, although when the family encounters death or life-threatening illness they can still revert to Dizang as the patron saint of the dead, a function that will likely fade into the background in the normal daily household routine.<sup>56</sup> Further research certainly needs to be undertaken in order to apprehend fully the impact of the Sahā Triad on the popular devotional culture in Taiwan. We can conclude, however, that the popular and exegetical, visual and doctrinal, commercial and spiritual aspects of religion continuously interact and redefine one another in a cyclical pattern that defies any attempt to reduce the richness of religious phenomena to a singular category.

<sup>55</sup> For the medieval Chinese practice of duplicating Dizang images, see stories 1, 2, 6, and 8 in the collection of miracle tales compiled in 989 AD by Changjin 常謹 (n. d.) titled *Record of Numinous Verifications of the Images of Dizang Bodhisattva* (*Dizang pusa xiang lingyan ji* 地藏菩薩像靈驗記); see *Xuzangjing* 續藏經, vol. 149, pp. 352A–369B (rpt. Taipei: Xinwen feng, 1993). For Japanese Buddhism, see discussion of the widespread practice of copying the icon at Zenkōji 善光寺 by Donald F. McCallum, *Zenkōji and Its Icon: A Study in Medieval Japanese Religious Art* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1994).

<sup>56</sup> An example is a Chinese immigrant family currently living in Oakland, California. Although the mother occasionally volunteers at the local Ciji office, she has no strong affiliation with Ciji, but subscribes more to a mixture of popular Chinese beliefs. In May, 2002, her son suffered severe head injury from an accident and faced potentially fatal brain damage. The mother has always worshipped Śākyamuni, Dizang, and Guanyin on her household shrine, so she repeatedly recited the *Scripture on the Past Vows of the Bodhisattva Dizang*, and vowed to abstain from eating meat in exchange for his complete recovery. The son made a speedy and total recovery.