



BRILL

REVIEW OF RELIGION AND CHINESE SOCIETY

11 (2024) 58–94

Review of Religion  
and Chinese Society

brill.com/rrcs

# Secular-Sacred Hybridity of Ren'ai: Charitable Organisations, Religious Networks and Ethical Identities in Contemporary China

*Theo Stapleton*

Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge,  
Cambridge, UK

*tjs202@cam.ac.uk*

Received 10 June 2024 | Accepted 31 August 2024 |

Published online 2 December 2024

## Abstract

This article explores the growth of religious philanthropy in contemporary China over the first two decades of the twenty-first century. By describing the strategies of one of China's most important Buddhist-inspired charities at macro, meso, and micro scales, I argue that the Ren'ai Charity Foundation's success is due to its strategic blurring of the boundaries between the sacred and the secular. This strategy is manifest in its negotiations with the secular state, internal organizational structures, and ethical discourse. Sacred-secular hybridity, the central concept advanced in this article, is an important feature of China's religious revival, and an important example of innovative strategies employed by non-government organizations in the policy gray areas of contemporary China. The sacred-secular hybridity of Ren'ai not only reveals the latest developments within Chinese religious philanthropy, but also serves as a theoretical framework to better understand the contested category of religion in contemporary China.

## Keywords

Buddhist charity – secularism – state-religion relations – ethics

# 仁爱慈善基金会的圣-俗杂糅：论当代中国的慈善组织、宗教网络和伦理观念

## 中文摘要

本文探讨了在21世纪前二十年中，宗教慈善事业在当代中国的发展。通过描述中国最重要的佛教慈善机构之一（仁爱慈善基金会）在宏观、中观和微观尺度上的策略，本文提出了仁爱基金会的成功在于它策略性地模糊了神圣与世俗之间的边界。这一策略从它与世俗国家、内部组织架构以及伦理话语的谈判中体现出来。本文提出的中心概念“神圣与世俗的杂糅性”是中国宗教复兴中的一个重要特征，也是当代中国非政府组织在政策灰色地带运用创新策略的一个重要范例。仁爱的神圣与世俗的杂糅性不仅揭示出中国慈善宗教事业的最新发展，也可以作为一种理论框架，以更好地理解当代中国宗教具有争议性的概念范畴。

## 關鍵詞

佛教慈善，世俗轮，宗教-国家关系，伦理

Among the myriad changes in the People's Republic of China (PRC) since the end of the Mao era, the revival of religion and the emergence of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) rank among the most significant. From the 1980s onward, China's so-called "associational revolution" (Salamon 1994) gave birth to a vibrant mix of new businesses, organizations, and not-for-profits that substantially reshaped the state-led economy of the previous three decades. At around the same time, the reopening of religious institutions allowed for the rehabilitation of religion's place in public life, as individuals and organizations sought to repair the material and symbolic damage caused by the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). This article investigates a phenomenon that lies at the intersection between these two well-documented trends: the emergence of religiously inspired charity organizations (RICOs).<sup>1</sup> RICOs provide a unique lens through which to view contemporary Chinese society, shedding light on

1 I use this term, coined by Caroline Fielder (2019), as opposed to the more common "faith-based organization" (FBO) or "religious NGO" (RNGO) because it more closely reflects the emic framings of Ren'ai's activities as well as the strategy of secular-sacred hybridity described in this article.

the government's evolving relationship with charitable and religious organizations, the evolving organizational strategies and structures of Chinese NGOs, and the variety of ethical discourses espoused in contemporary China.

This article asks how Buddhist RICOS have been able to grow over the last two decades in a country ruled by a party that remains suspicious of religious institutions. The following three sections present explanations at the macro, meso, and micro levels. The first section outlines the century-long dialogue between the secular state and its religious citizens and shows how it created space for religious philanthropy in the present moment. The second section asks how RICOS have adapted their organizational strategies and structures to operate in China's rapidly changing society. Lastly, I discuss the way RICO's moral discourses create transformative religious identities. Using empirical data gathered over nine months of online and onsite fieldwork with a Buddhist-inspired charity called the Beijing Ren'ai Charity Foundation (hereafter Ren'ai), I seek to provide answers to these questions while engaging with broader theoretical debates about the category of religion in China. My central argument is that Ren'ai succeeds by adopting a strategy of sacred-secular hybridity that is manifest at macro, meso, and micro levels. Ren'ai blurs the lines between the secular and the sacred through its engagements with the state as a secular and patriotic institution, its integration of religious and secular networks within a hybrid organizational structure, and a universalizing moral discourse that accommodates secular and sacred understandings of the good. The strategy of hybridity is the key to understanding the growth of Ren'ai and presents an important conceptual tool for the study of RICOS, faith-based organizations, and other institutions within contemporary China.

### **From Secularization to Hybridization**

Questions about the relationship between religion and modernization go back to the earliest sociological theories, one of the most influential being the secularization thesis that predicted the decline of religion in modern societies. The secularization theory was taken up again in the second half of the twentieth century by scholars who argued that the social significance of religion was on the decline in modern societies (Wilson 1966) and that religion had moved from the public to the private sphere and become more autonomous through a process of "structural differentiation" (Parsons 1966). However, the continued resilience of religion has led to widespread criticism of the secularization theory (Stark 1999), with one of the founding proponents of the theory writing that "the assumption that we live in a secularised world is false" and

claiming that the “whole body of literature by historians and social scientists, loosely labelled secularization theory, is essentially mistaken” (Berger 1996). Central to the secularization debate, and the argument of this article, is the category of religion, which is founded on a distinction between the sacred and the secular. The sacred-secular distinction is deeply rooted in the history of the Enlightenment and the emergence of the modern secular state in Europe (Asad 1993). The culturally contingent nature of this distinction and the category of religion becomes patently clear when we observe its introduction into China during the modernization projects of the twentieth century. In China this new category of religion (*zongjiao* 宗教), previously non-existent, was variously “imposed, rejected, appropriated, expanded, contracted, and assigned a place within ideological systems by different actors over the last century” (Palmer and Goessart 2011:9). Recent studies argue that the religious question played a fundamental role in the production of Chinese modernity and the modern Chinese state (Ashiwa and Wank 2009; Kiely and Brooks 2016). The most fruitful approaches to the study of religion in China do not take religion and secularization to be objective categories or universal processes, but instead explore the ways these contingent categories have functioned in a non-Western religious ecosystem. This article builds on such research by interrogating the sacred-secular binary in the context of contemporary religious philanthropy. I argue that the seeming paradox of a religious community that engages in ‘secular’ philanthropy is best explained through the concept of hybridity, not secularization. This article describes the strategy of one organization that plays on the secular-sacred distinction, benefiting from both the presence and absence of “religion” and in doing so creatively reimagines religion for a “post-secular” China (Madsen 2009).

This study also contributes to the literature on “faith-based organizations” (FBO), a loosely defined category of organizations that have some connection with religious ideas and/or institutions (Sider and Unruh 2004). RICOS can be understood as a subset of FBOs<sup>2</sup> that conduct charitable activities. Here I use the terms “religious charity,” “RICOS,” and “religious philanthropy” interchangeably. FBOs have attracted interest from various disciplines including religious studies, anthropology, sociology, political science, and development studies. Existing research has explored FBOs’ relationship to the state and legal structures, organizational structures and the impact of their projects, and to a lesser extent the subjective experiences of people who are engaged in these spaces. On the first of those themes, scholars have explored the role that FBOs play in

---

2 For a full discussion of this terminology, see Fielder (2019).

the public sphere, or civil society (Herbert 2003; Clarke and Jennings 2008), their influence on the policy-making process (Deneulin and Bano 2009; Carbonnier 2013; Hefferan et al. 2009; Jones and Petersen 2011), cooperation with the state regarding the provision of public services (Koh and Coles 2019; Singletary 2003; Gallet 2016; Duff, Battcock, Karam, and Taylor 2016) and how they fit into the international system of development aid, global governance, and conflict resolution (Benthal 2016; Clarke 2018). Another broad area of research has focused on the organizations themselves, including their internal operations and the nature and impact of their activities (Lewis et al. 2013). These studies have sought to understand the role of religious values in FBOs (Barden-O'Fallon 2017; Dobbs 2019), the differences between secular and religious organizations (Torry 2017; Jeavons 1993; Glosnek 2017), the combination of religious aims with nominally secular activities (Chambré 2001; Schmid 2013; Ebaugh et al. 2006), and their proselytizing potential (Ahmed 2005). The last area, and perhaps the least well explored, is the question of individuals' participation in FBOs. This includes discussions about the motivations of paid and unpaid volunteers (Akindola 2011) and the meaning that individuals ascribe to these activities (Askeland et al. 2020). While studies of non-Chinese contexts provide important points of comparison, here I answer the call from scholars in the field to "find language and concepts that can accurately be applied in describing religious organizations with roots beyond the Judeo-Christian tradition" (Jeavons 2004:142).

Contemporary China presents as an ideal place to conduct research on FBOs, and RICOS more specifically, because of the "philanthropic turn" (Wu 2017) in religious organizations over the last three decades. Most of the research on religious philanthropy in the Chinese-speaking world has focused on several hugely successful Taiwanese Buddhist institutions, including Tzu Chi (Huang 2009; O'Neil 2010; Yao 2012) and Fo Guang Shan (Chandler 2004). Partly due to ease of access, studies of religious philanthropy in the PRC have also predominantly focused on Taiwanese or Hong Kong-based RICOS (Kuah-Pearce 2014). The shortage of research into mainland organizations is particularly problematic given the diverse historical, political, and cultural influences on RICOS across the regions of greater China. Within the current literature on mainland Chinese RICOS, state-society relations have been a key focus (Laliberté, Palmer, and Wu 2011). Interest in Chinese civil society has inspired significant research into the potential political impact of RICOS (Madsen 2007; Laliberté 2003, 2004, 2009, 2012). Comparative studies across the Chinese-speaking world have also generated empirical and theoretical insights used here (Weller et al. 2017). In the context of mainland China, Susan

McCarthy (2013) takes the view that FBOs are “repurposing the state,” arguing that while they do support the regime’s policy goals, their actions can also be considered “subtle, non-contentious resistance” (48). Studies on religious networks and their various innovative institutional forms are less well developed but equally important. Existing research provides case studies of charity supermarkets (Shue 2011), Buddhist child-welfare provisions (Chen and Lan 2017), and charitable activities within local folk religion (Chau 2006; Lai 2018). Studies of Protestant FBOs like the Amity Foundation (Carino 2016a, 2016b) also provide important snapshots of the sector, although their situation differs significantly compared to the Buddhist-inspired philanthropic groups that are the focus of this article. Caroline Fielder’s writing on Protestant, Catholic, and Buddhist RICOS (2019) usefully explores the ambiguity that allows RICOS to exploit “opportunity spaces” (Yavuz 2003) in contemporary China, a concept that has been influential in my thinking on the topic. The last, and perhaps least explored aspect of this research is the development of moral identities within RICOS. Against the backdrop of a perceived moral decline during the reform and opening-up period (Osburg 2013; Osnos 2014), the emergence of volunteering and religion as compassionate countercurrents has attracted interest (Fleischer 2011; Spires 2018; Luova 2011; Fisher 2014). However, the role of moral discourses and volunteer identities within RICOS in contemporary China remains a promising but understudied area of inquiry.

### Data Collection and Methodology

The data for this article was collected with fully informed consent over nine months of online and offline ethnographic research, using methods approved by an ethics review process at the Oxford School of Global and Area Studies. In line with ethical guidelines, names of all research participants have been anonymized throughout, while the organization’s real name has been retained with the permission of its leadership. I first became aware of Ren’ai when I met one of its volunteers during fieldwork at a Chinese temple in 2018. In late 2019 I was put in touch with their leadership by a former volunteer and current Buddhist monastic, and through snowball sampling began phase 1 of data collection. Phase 1 consisted of one month of in-person participant observation in Beijing. I attended weekly internal meetings at the headquarters, and also joined the executive on visits to several grassroots “stations” in Beijing. I participated in a range of their activities, including daily “soup kitchens” and study groups and attended a weekend trip to provide support for children in

a disadvantaged area of a nearby province. Through this process I was able to have informal conversations with individuals at every level of the organization. Interlocutors ranged from the general secretary to first time volunteers and included both men and women from their early twenties to late eighties.

Due to the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic, virtual ethnography became the key data collection method used in phase 2. The one month of in-person fieldwork allowed me to build strong relationships that made subsequent online engagements possible. As in-person events were canceled, I was invited to participate in the organization's online activities, which sometimes amounted to several hours of online meetings per day. These events included sharing sessions between the Beijing leadership and regional chapters from cities in the Northeastern Provinces (Changchun, Dalian, and Ha'erbin), along with chapters from Hunan, Fujian, and Shanghai. I also attended meetings about particular programs like palliative care in hospitals, and a ten-week course for the core volunteers on the organization's guiding principles. Online methods allowed me to gain access to the organization that would have been impossible otherwise, given my location in the UK and the limitations on travel during the Covid-19 pandemic. It also allowed me to gain an in-depth understanding of the emic categories that have been used extensively in my analysis. Toward the end of the research process, I conducted five in-depth semi-structured interviews with individuals at different levels of the organization. Throughout the entire period I triangulated personal observations by consulting a wide variety of online information, including social media accounts, publicly available financial and legal reports, blog posts, and internal chat groups. These methods resulted in a substantial and rich dataset which informs the body of my analysis.

Empirical data from fieldwork are cited parenthetically in the text, using the prefixes IN (interview), FW (fieldwork), and OFW (online fieldwork). For more information on the sources, see the appendix.

### Introducing the Ren'ai Charity Foundation

Ren'ai is headquartered in Beijing and has a presence in over twenty provinces across China.<sup>3</sup> After being founded in 2006 with only four volunteers, Ren'ai registered a cumulative half a million attendances at their events in 2019

---

<sup>3</sup> As of 2019 (during fieldwork).

(IN1),<sup>4</sup> making it one of the largest and most successful Buddhist-inspired charities in the country. The organization was founded and funded at the behest of a Buddhist monastic named Xuecheng, who from 2015 to 2018 was the president of the Buddhist Association of China. Ren'ai's headquarters is exclusively staffed by Xuecheng's lay devotees, but there is no official link between Xuecheng and the organization. The success of Ren'ai's sacred-secular hybridity described in this article, along with the influential status of its spiritual leader, mean that it is likely to have trend-setting effects within the Chinese Buddhist world, and perhaps the RICO sector at large. Ren'ai is also representative of a broader trend toward industrialized philanthropy, where the production and distribution of philanthropic goods has been "increasingly rationalized and bureaucratized in ways that included accounting methods, reporting responsibilities to boards of directors, recruitment and organization of members, use of media and above all relations with the government" (Weller et al.:2). In this way, analysis of Ren'ai's strategies might shed light on broader processes emerging within the sector (Laliberté 2022).

However, Ren'ai's particularities also make it a productive case study. In 2018 Xuecheng resigned from official positions after a scandal emerged via a leaked internal report and the subsequent government investigation found him guilty of sexual and financial misconduct. After 2018 the organization continued to grow, albeit with a slightly reduced level of donations. This presents an interesting paradox that demands explanation. How did Ren'ai manage to avoid the impacts of this public-relations crisis, including the loss of high-level support within the state system, which could so easily have led to its demise? Observing the subtleties of Ren'ai's strategy provides unique insights into the survival strategies of RICOs that operate in the policy "grey zone" of contemporary China (Wu 2015; Yang 2006). I argue hybridity is the key to Ren'ai's success, which allowed it to publicly distance itself from the Buddhist community from which it grew, presenting itself as a secular NGO, while simultaneously fulfilling its religious mission. Theoretically, this case frustrates the sacred-secular duality at the heart of the category of religion, and reveals how religious philanthropy creatively reimagines religion in contemporary China. In the following three sections I show how the blurring of these boundaries constitutes (1) the core of Ren'ai's strategic engagements with the state; (2) the deliberately overlapping secular/sacred networks that make up its organizational structure; and (3) the ethical projects of individual volunteers from the grassroots to the leadership.

---

4 "Cumulative" here means the number of times that volunteers participated in events; the real number of volunteers is probably in the thousands.



## RICOS and the State

### *Twentieth Century: Buddhist Philanthropy and the Modern Secular State*

The dramatic processes of Chinese modernization throughout the twentieth century featured a long negotiation between the secular state and its religious citizens about the proper role of religion in Chinese society. The modern Chinese term for religion first appeared in public policy in the summer of 1898 (Goossaert 2006), when religious institutions were brought into direct conflict with Chinese modernity through the policy of confiscating temple property for schools. Forced acquisition of temple property and a new distinction between religion and superstition would remain important features of religious policy throughout the twentieth century. Crucial to this new system was the “Christian-secular normative model,” which refers to a system that separates the secular state from the church, drawing a line “between religion and non-religion ... that was inconceivable in the imperial Chinese system” (Palmer and Goossaert 2011:68). Both the Nationalists’ and the Chinese Communist Party’s vision of Chinese modernity involved a secular state that treated religion as a distinct institutional sphere to be regulated and mobilized for nation-building projects. The persecution of non-churchlike institutions based on this new understanding of religion led Chinese Buddhists to create over eighteen aspiring national Buddhist organizations between 1912 and 1929 (Welch 1968:26). The recognition of the Chinese Buddhist Association in 1929 provided Buddhists with a voice within the system, and although internal factionalism persisted (Campo 2017), they were able to provide relatively effective protection against the secular state over the first half of the twentieth century (Ji 2015). Paradoxically, by adapting to this modern conception of religion introduced by the secular state that sought to limit its influence, Buddhists gained an institutional voice that remains important to this day (Ji 2008).

Just as modern conceptions of traditional Chinese medicine were forged through encounters with Western medicine (Lei 2014), the encounter with a secular state and modernist discourses had a profound effect on Chinese Buddhist institutions, theory, and practice. Over the first half of the twentieth century, notable lay practitioners and monastics like Yang Wenhui (1937–1911) and Taixu (1890–1947) attempted to carry out reforms that would bring Buddhism into line with a modernizing China (Pittman 2001). Secular education was combined with traditional Buddhist learning (Travagnin 2017), Buddhism was brought into conversation with modern science (Hammerstrom 2015), and a socially engaged form of Buddhism emerged. Turning away from the “superstitious” focus on favorable rebirth, the theological innovation that the Western

Pure Land Amitábha could be attained on this earth encouraged Buddhists to “serve the needs of human beings here and now” (King 2018:6). A newly empowered group of elite lay Buddhists created integrated organizational forms that established philanthropy as a major element of modern Buddhist practice (Brooks 2010). While Buddhist charity had already existed for centuries (Smith 2007), the Republican period saw the rise of “larger, pan-Chinese organizations” like the Red Swastika Society (Palmer and Goossaert 2011:79) that engaged in famine and flood relief, education, health care, and assistance to wartime refugees (Dubois 2011). Notable Shanghai lay Buddhist Wang Yiting (1867–1938) worked with Christians and Confucian charities, martial arts groups, and spirit-writing groups, and while presenting “a public face as ‘secular’ charities, [they] were actually, for the initiated members, devotional groups dedicated to the worship of Taoist and Buddhist saints” (Palmer and Goossaert 2011:79), a strategy directly analogous to the sacred-secular hybridity described in this article. These organizations combined traditional Chinese belief systems with a “modern” form of charity inspired by organizations like the Red Cross and the charitable activities of Christian missionaries. Modern Buddhist philanthropy combined sacred, secular, traditional, and modern influences within new hybrid structures, and in doing so presented Buddhism as a constructive force within Chinese modernity.

While Buddhist philanthropy thrived in Taiwan during the second half of the twentieth century under the banner of Humanistic Buddhism (*renjian fojiao* 人间佛教), the religious ecosystem in mainland China took a significantly different path after 1949 under the CCP. While Buddhist practice was initially allowed to continue within the corporatist framework of the United Front, the CCP’s secularization project devolved into militant atheism during the iconoclastic violence of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976; Yang 2004). Religious philanthropy was considered an unnecessary bourgeois activity and was all but eradicated during the first three decades of the PRC. However, temples slowly began to reopen during the 1970s (Strong and Strong 1973), and by the 1980s the state had changed its approach, recognizing that religion should once again be institutionalized and regulated rather than banned outright. By 1980 the Buddhist Association of China (BAC) was re-established,<sup>5</sup> and in 1982 *Document 19* formalized this new tolerance of religion, and freedom of religious belief was enshrined in the constitution. Returning to the corporatist model of religious governance, the state focused on making religion compatible with socialism with Chinese characteristics under the slogan “love country,

5 It was established in 1953, after several failed attempts, and then ceased to exist except in name in 1966 (Ji 2008).

love religion” (*aiguo aijiao* 爱国爱教). These turbulent years are fresh in the memory of Chinese Buddhists, who I argue adopt hybridity as a strategy to protect against possible further attacks.

The hybridity of Buddhism has been on full display during the religious revival of the reform and opening-up period: temples became economic assets in the eyes of local tourism bureaus, places of worship for Buddhist believers, diplomatic tools in the eyes of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and a set of ubiquitous cultural symbols in a nonetheless increasingly pluralistic cultural landscape. Zhao Puchu (1907–2000), the head of the BAC from 1980 to his death in 2000, supported many hybridizing strategies in order to better Buddhists’ relationship with the state (Ji 2017). He blurred the distinction between Chinese culture and Buddhism, framing Buddhism as a topic of study (*foxue* 佛学) rather than a religion, and as a diplomatic tool for the state (Zhang and Ji 2018). The number of legally registered temples grew from a handful in the 1980s to 15,000 by 2008 (Sun 2011), and the number of Han monastics increased by 8 percent from 1994 to 2006 (Ji 2012:13).

As Buddhist communities grew, philanthropic practices began to reappear, in many ways continuing where reformers in the Republican period had left off, focusing on education, healthcare, disaster relief, and care homes for the aged, among other endeavors. Master Zhen Chan at the Jade Buddha Temple in Shanghai reportedly began donating to a children’s charity association as early as 1984 and became its honorable head in 1988 (Wu 2015). The Nanputuo Charitable Foundation in Nanjing was the first charity to be officially registered with the state in 1994 (Ashiwa and Wank 2005). In the 1990s the Wuxi Lingshan Tourism Co. Ltd. was founded through a government economic planning scheme, which eventually led to the establishment of the Lingshan Charity Foundation in 2004 (Wu 2015). The famed Shaolin Monastery in Henan founded the Shaolin Charity and Welfare Foundation in 1994 and has gone on to build a substantial organization (Wu 2017). Suzhou Honghua Society, initially founded in 1930 by Pureland Master Yin Guang (1862–1940), was also re-established when Bao Guo Monastery was reopened in the 1990s. Several other RICOS were established during the 2000s, including the Chongqing Huayan Culture and Education Foundation in 2006 and the An Foundation in 2009. Ren’ai is a part of this latest wave of Buddhist philanthropy.

In sum, Buddhist philanthropy has played a significant role in the negotiations between the modern secular state and its religious citizens. The charitable endeavors of monastic and lay Buddhists over the last century creatively redefined the meaning of religion by blurring sacred-secular and traditional-modern dualities in a way that allowed them to not only survive but thrive in a turbulent political landscape. Ren’ai’s strategy of sacred-secular

hybridity is best understood as the latest chapter in this *longue durée* of negotiations over Buddhism's position within Chinese society.

### *Twenty-First Century: Ren'ai and the State*

After the “rehabilitation of charity” in the 1990s (Hsu 2008), Buddhist philanthropy became an increasingly important factor in the relationship between Buddhists and the state. In 2001 CCP leaders Jiang Zemin and Zhu Rongji held a several-day-long conference with the Religious Affairs Bureau during which they affirmed religions' positive contribution to society (Laliberté 2003). Donations to charity in general grew at an astonishing rate over the 2000s, jumping from several billion in 2005 to 22.3 billion in 2007, and then to a staggering 107 billion in 2008 (Lu et al. 2016). The support provided by RICOs during the Wenchuan Earthquake of 2008, in which Ren'ai took part, is often talked about as a turning point in the state's attitude toward the sector (Wu 2017; Xu 2017). Yet, while religious charity began to re-emerge as early as the 1980s, it was not until 2012 that the State Administration for Religious Affairs and five other departments published “Advice on Encouraging and Standardizing the Participation of Religious Groups in Philanthropy or Charitable Activities” (SARA 2012). The inaugural Religious Charity Week was held later that year and the government's support for the development of RICOs was formalized, turning a new page for RICOs in the PRC. I refer to the processes by which RICOs curry favor with the state as “political merit-making” (Weller et al. 2017). The rest of this section outlines three features of Ren'ai's political merit-making strategy that help explain the growth of RICOs in the twenty-first century. The hybridity of these strategies allows Ren'ai to present its activity to the state as patriotic and secular, while simultaneously expanding the space for Buddhist cultivation.

Responding to the new set of socioeconomic challenges that emerged from the market liberalization of the reform and opening-up era (Thornton 2013), provision of material support has been key to Ren'ai's strategy. Over this time the state has gradually acknowledged the role of NGOs that help fill gaps in social-service provision. In a 2014 speech transcribed on the BAC website, Venerable Mingsheng argued that the seventy official Buddhist charities registered between 1994 and 2012 have “greatly relieved the pressure of the state and society” (BAC 2014). This view was endorsed in a 2018 State Council White Paper, citing the 1 billion RMB that had been donated to charitable causes over the first six years of the Religious Charity Week, praising RICOs for their contribution to society (Xinhua 2018). In this way religious groups generate political merit that they hope will protect them from potentially aggressive regulation.

Ren'ai's general secretary summed up the organization's relationship to the government in this way: "We don't say we are better than the government, or try to take their place, we just make the overall picture more perfect" (OFW10). In fact, one of Ren'ai's five charity ideals is *buwei cishan* 补位慈善, literally charity that "covers" or "fills in" (OFW8). Ren'ai also overtly supports state goals and seeks cooperation wherever it can. For example, the education support program for rural children is organized with cooperation from the All-China Women's Federation, a state-run mass organization that provides Ren'ai with the contact information of aid recipients. This program then sends volunteers to the countryside at regular intervals with cash stipends, food supplies, and emotional support, supplementing the state's social welfare system. Just like other charities (Lai et al. 2015), Ren'ai pays careful attention to the state's policy priorities, seen clearly in the establishment of environmental protection stations in 2017 shortly after "Ecological Civilization" became a state policy priority (Goron 2018). Ren'ai also aligns itself with "harmonious society" discourse, by deescalating social unrest among the most disadvantaged through a focus on emotional support and arguing that "funding is just the start, but caring is the key" (FW4). During visits to impoverished households, that meant optimistically talking about the state's plan for rural revitalization, even though some volunteers privately thought these programs were insufficient. Volunteers are told to listen respectfully to complaints about the government but to refrain from reinforcing their sense of injustice and instead to offer encouragement and positivity.

The hybridity of this material philanthropy is that while it is legible through the secular lens of the state, it is understood internally through the Buddhist framework of the bodhisattva path (*pusadao* 菩萨道) as relieving the suffering of all sentient beings and accumulating Buddhist merit. Ren'ai's internal distinction between essence (*xing* 性) and form (*xiang* 相) perfectly describes this hybridity (OFW8). What they refer to as material charity (*wuzhi cishan* 物质慈善), the practice of providing secular philanthropic goods and services, is merely the form, while spiritual charity (*xinling cishan* 心灵慈善), the creation of Buddhist merit, is their essence. Material charity is important to the state, but for the lay Buddhists within the organization this is not the true essence, but instead a formal property that allows it to justify its existence to the state. While they both refer to the same set of empirical phenomena, these public and private meanings attached to Ren'ai's philanthropic production allow them to curry favor with the state while also serving their own religious aims.

Ren'ai also pursues political merit-making at a symbolic level by adopting a state discourse that is understood in secular and religious contexts. For example, the slogan for a two-day educational assistance trip to a county in

Hebei province was “Don’t forget your original intention” (*buwangchuxin* 不忘初心), a key political slogan of the Xi administration. Interestingly, this phrase also embodies a hybridity of symbolic meanings, as it first appeared in the Tang dynasty Buddhist text “A Pictorial Account of the Ascension of Maitreya Buddha” (画弥勒上生帧记). During the official dinner to celebrate the trip, at which representatives from the local Civil Affairs Bureau and officials of the All-China Women’s Federation were present, this term became the subject of a game where we all looked under our seats to find the term’s characters. After the characters were arranged in order on the stage, the hosts of the event discussed the term in extremely general language, leaving much open to interpretation. Many volunteers explained the term to me using the language of the bodhisattva path and emanating Bodhi mind (*faputixin* 发菩提心), while others directly acknowledged the term’s political significance. This segment of the dinner was then followed by an explicitly patriotic performance, as we all stood to sing the nationalist anthem of the year, “My People, My Country,” complete with a music video featuring images of China’s army, navy, and air force. At one stage an elderly volunteer passionately took the stage to conduct the performance. This expression of patriotic nationalism was followed by a vote of thanks from the Ministry of Civil Affairs representative, during which he explicitly referenced the importance of Buddhism and presented a work of calligraphy featuring a painting of a lotus leaf, a key Buddhist symbol, as a token of the state’s appreciation.

The juxtaposition of Ren’ai’s secular nationalism and the state representatives’ use of Buddhist symbols is a revealing vignette of the state-RICO relationship. While the case of one local official should not be overstated, this exchange reveals the importance of disaggregating the state, which while officially atheist was in this case entirely comfortable endorsing a religious tradition that Ren’ai would never mention publicly. Ren’ai’s symbolic strategy of political merit-making is not only acknowledged through awards and certificates from the state, but in this case through a direct endorsement of its sacred core, revealing the give-and-take dynamics that characterize the RICO-state relationship in contemporary China and the strength of Ren’ai’s hybrid approach.

The key feature that runs through Ren’ai’s political merit-making is the removal of all explicitly Buddhist terminology from its public discourse. From Ren’ai’s inception in 2006, it was registered with the Beijing Municipal Civil Affairs Bureau as a private foundation, with no official connection to a religious organization. One of the volunteers present at the time described operating within a regulatory environment that has not explicitly endorsed RICOs as “crossing the river by feeling the stones” (IN1). To this day, public

religious symbols remain sensitive, evidenced in recent years by the removal of crosses from Christian churches and Buddhist religious symbols from educational institutions (Bitter Winter 2019). While many of the Buddhist charities in contemporary China make explicit references to religion, Ren'ai's publicly available materials and official status make no mention of its Buddhist ties, especially after the scandal of 2018. Ren'ai events implement a policy of the "four no's: no discussion of politics, no spreading religion, no discussion of business, and no leaving name cards" (FW3). While these rules are not always followed, as in the case of the volunteer who proudly announced that she had converted someone on their deathbed, the leadership in Beijing constantly reminds members that they must "respect the laws of the country" (OFW2). By minimizing any overtly religious content, Ren'ai not only puts the state at ease by presenting as a non-political, non-proselytizing organization, but also distances the organization from potential scandals within religious communities, like the one that overcame Xuecheng in 2018. Bans on discussing business also serve to prevent corruption controversies like the one that struck the Red Cross in 2011 (Long 2016).

However, this should not be mistaken for simple secularization, but is rather another example of Ren'ai's hybridity in action. During discussions with the leadership, it was explained that Ren'ai has transformed the principles of Mahayana Buddhism for a secular context (FW1). While the organization could be understood through a secular lens, it also embodies what they term "spiritual charity." According to the current leader (IN1), Ren'ai is grounded in "*rushidao* culture" (Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist culture), a politically expedient framing responding to Xi Jinping's endorsement of "Excellent Chinese Traditional Culture" (Xinhua 2019). Even at its most religious, Ren'ai's public discourse explicitly avoids a sectarian focus on Buddhism or its own master. Ren'ai's name itself comes from a Confucian term, and among the self-organized study groups that I attended, volunteers studied Confucian and Buddhist texts. This hybrid strategy blurs the line between Chinese culture and Buddhism. When asked about his goals in China, Hsing Yun, the leader of Taiwan's most important Buddhist order, Fo Guang Shan, said, "I don't want to promote Buddhism! I only promote Chinese culture to cleanse humanity" (Johnson 2017). At other times his clergy have claimed that Buddhism is not really a religion (Yao and Gombrich 2018). Tzu Chi, the Taiwanese RICO with a presence in every Chinese province, also adopts the same approach. In all of these cases, while there is an absence of public religiosity, this absence is best understood as a political merit-making tool which paradoxically expands the space for religious cultivation in contemporary China by repackaging religious cultivation in the language of the secular state.

Ren'ai's macro-level strategy of sacred-secular hybridity can be seen as the latest move in a century-long negotiation between Buddhists and the secular state over the meaning of religion in Chinese modernity. By presenting itself as a constructive, patriotic, and secular institution, Ren'ai's political merit-making strategy has allowed it to succeed in a CCP-sanctioned sector.

### The Secular-Sacred Hybridity of Ren'ai's Networks

The hybridity that defines Ren'ai's state-engagement also permeates its organizational structure, which embeds a devout Buddhist community within a highly efficient and focused "secular" organization. In this section I will first describe the secular-sacred network and then show how the hybridity of Ren'ai's internal structure allows for religious and non-religious networks to overlap in organic ways, facilitating a bidirectional flow of resources that makes all three networks stronger than they would be on their own.

#### *Monastic, Lay, and Secular Networks*

The first relevant network to discuss when analyzing Ren'ai is a monastic community led by one of the most influential Chinese Buddhist monks of the twenty-first century. In 1990, at the age of twenty-four, Xuecheng became the youngest abbot in China and rose quickly through the Buddhist world, occupying several important positions within the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and the Buddhist Association of China. In the early 2000s he oversaw the reconstruction of a temple on the outskirts of Beijing. Much like Hsing Yun, Xuecheng sought to cultivate a community of well-educated monastics, making headlines as scores of graduates from Beijing's top universities were ordained at the temple. According to his followers, by 2018 this temple alone was home to several hundred monks, and along with the other temples under his control, Xuecheng's monastic network is one of the most significant in China. In recent years this network has expanded onto the global stage, with young monastics being sent to study at overseas universities and temples being built in Africa, America, and the Netherlands. However, at the end of 2018 Xuecheng was embroiled in a scandal that emerged after a ninety-five-page document written by insiders made public a range of accusations against him. At the end of 2018 he resigned from his official positions, although most of his followers have remained loyal. In fact, many of his disciples have now left Beijing to open their own monasteries, which according to his followers has strengthened the network.



The second relevant network is the lay Buddhist community who follow Xuecheng. Building on the early proponents of Humanistic Buddhism, Xuecheng sought to take his teachings to society at large, designing a cartoon series based on a robot monk and writing blogs from 2006 onward that have been translated into seven different languages across several platforms. This earned him significant support among lay Buddhists, including elites like tech entrepreneur Zhang Xiaolong, the founder of China's most widely used mobile app, Wechat. Individuals within this lay Buddhist network may attend Dharma Assemblies, small Buddhist study groups (*xuefo xiaozu* 学佛小组), and meditation retreats, and also volunteer at the temple. Some also live within the temple grounds for extended times, attend Buddhist pilgrimages, and even volunteer at other temples within the master's sphere of influence. Broadly speaking, this is reflective of other lay Buddhist communities in China. However, after the crisis of 2018, events for the laity organized through the temple were canceled, and the public Wechat account that published Xuecheng's writings and provided guidance for lay followers has not been updated since. Individuals within this network told me that they did not believe the accusations against Xuecheng, claiming that they were probably politically motivated. While the structured system of small study groups previously organized by the temple for lay followers no longer functions publicly, they continue secretly; trips are still made to Xuecheng's monasteries, and he is still contactable within the network. Despite the changes, members of this network told me it was a "great time to be a devotee of Xuecheng" (FW6), partly due to the ongoing vibrance of Ren'ai. This lay Buddhist network is not only the driving force within Ren'ai, but also provides essential support to Xuecheng's monastic community.

The last network is the hybrid secular-sacred structure of Ren'ai itself. While there is no formal connection between Ren'ai's officially secular structures and the Buddhist community, it is the dynamic interaction between these networks that defines Ren'ai's hybridity. The three levels within Ren'ai's official structure are the central leadership, the core volunteers, and the grassroots volunteers, with the former two groups almost entirely populated by Xuecheng's network of lay followers. The central leadership team functions much like any secular charity, consisting of twenty individuals, including a general secretary and her team, along with six departments, each with its own director and vice-directors. However, unlike most secular charities, they are all unpaid volunteers. Some are committed full-time to Ren'ai activities, while others have jobs to support themselves. The current general secretary was a high-level employee of one of China's most important telecom companies before quitting to become a full-time volunteer. Other volunteers at the headquarters have their own businesses, a working partner, or in one case a

boss that supports their charitable activities. Underneath each department exists a range of substructures, the most numerous being the “soup stations” and the environmental protection stations, which have fifty-seven and ninety-five subgroups respectively; smaller structures exist for other programs. Within these subgroups, the core volunteers (*gugan* 骨干) function as team leaders who take on the most responsibility, and most of them are followers of Xuecheng. The final level of this structure is the grassroots level. The level of commitment among grassroots volunteers varies significantly, from biannual educational assistance trips to daily soup kitchen events beginning in the early hours of the morning. These volunteers are much less likely to be followers of Xuecheng, and may even belong to other religious communities or have no religious affiliation. However, as will become clear, Ren'ai is also structured to encourage movement along this spectrum, encouraging volunteers to take on more responsibility, bringing them closer to the organization's religious core.

### *A Religious Engine in a Secular Machine*

The Buddhist community informally embedded within Ren'ai provides the organization with well-organized social structures through which to grow and a clearly defined spiritual purpose that energizes Ren'ai's core volunteers.

Structurally, the small Buddhist study groups organized through Xuecheng's temple are the backbone of the lay Buddhist network. These groups provide a systematic study regime focused on Xuecheng's teachings, which connect lay followers with monastic teachers. Lay followers can then teach classes themselves once they have mastered the content, allowing the network to expand. These groups strengthen the vertical relationship between the devotee and Xuecheng, while also creating strong horizontal social bonds between followers, as they study together, share rides to and from the temple, and become “virtuous friends” (*shanyou* 善友). During the first few years of Ren'ai's existence these small groups provided the ideal structures to recruit and mobilize volunteers (IN2). Several leading volunteers told me that they were initially members of small Buddhist study groups at the temple and then made their way to Ren'ai. By studying together, individuals build trusting relationships and encourage each other to keep up their commitment by valorizing those who take on more responsibility. The fact that these study groups have continued to function after the events of 2018 reveals the resilience of the social capital<sup>6</sup> built up within them. During my online fieldwork I was made aware of volunteers taking classes every day via online platforms. At one stage during a

<sup>6</sup> Social capital simply refers to the bonds between individuals that facilitate cooperation and shared identity.

dinner with informants, three classes were being broadcast via phones simultaneously around the table. A vice-director of one department explained to me that “a team that follows a Buddhist master (*shifayou tuandui* 师法友团队) is incredibly powerful,” which is an apt description of the function of study groups as the driving force within Ren'ai's hybrid structure.

The social or spiritual capital<sup>7</sup> of this network is directed toward Ren'ai's secular structures by Xuecheng's insistence on socially engaged Buddhist cultivation. Building on the Humanistic Buddhism of the early twentieth century, Xuecheng argues that doing good deeds is a fundamental part of the bodhisattva path and is therefore essential in order to attain Buddhahood. Legitimizing secular philanthropic activity as a means to attain sacred merit has proven to be a powerful ideology in Taiwan, as Tzu Chi, the most successful RICO, counts over 20 percent of the population among its volunteers (Liao 2012). A key emic concept which explains the relationship between the religious community and its secular engagements at Ren'ai is *shangqiu xiahua* (上求下化), which translates as “seek from above and transform below” (OFW4). According to the general secretary, this means drawing on the wisdom of Buddhism (*fodao* 佛道) for energy and transforming this knowledge into actions which benefit all sentient beings. Xuecheng tells his followers that cultivation requires a balance of these two dynamics. Concentrating solely on social impact, *xiahua*, is seen as unsustainable. Xuecheng and his monasteries are referred to as energy centers that power Ren'ai's social engagement (OFW7), and several informants blamed the burning out of volunteers in secular NGOs on a lack of spiritual motivation. This ideology functions much like the doctrine of predetermination that led Calvinists to pursue industrious lives to prove that they were destined for heaven (Weber 1905). The shared belief among this network that a connection with the *Dharma* (Buddhist teachings) provides energy for charitable activities means that individuals treat Ren'ai as a means toward spiritual attainment. This belief in socially engaged cultivation, combined with the pre-existing structures of the lay Buddhist network, make it a highly dynamic force within Ren'ai's broader structure.

### *The Strength of “Secular” Structures*

The “secular” structures of Ren'ai also serve to strengthen this hybrid organization by allowing it to operate according to the professional standards of a

7 Here I understand “spiritual capital” as a subset of “social capital” that binds groups together in religious contexts (Berger and Hefner 2003: 3; Metanexus, cited in Baker and Smith, 2011: 8).

contemporary NGO, create highly inclusive events, and break down the distinction between donor and recipient.

Ren'ai uses the concept of the "three changes" (*sanhua* 三化)—organization, standardization, and professionalization—to describe its organizational culture.<sup>8</sup> All events at Ren'ai are meticulously recorded. It is a point of pride for the captain of a soup station that they can report exactly how many cups of soup were handed out on any given morning, and the names of all volunteers present. When resources are delivered, forms are signed, fingerprints are recorded, and photos are taken (FW1). This culture also demands a level of transparency that makes Ren'ai events highly legible to the state. Just as in a company or sports team, professional culture is actively discussed within the organization. During one two-hour training session the core volunteer group studied the definition of a "good team" and "efficiency," directly drawing on lessons from the private sector (OFW9). Xuecheng tells his followers to solve real-world problems with real-world solutions and warns against the discussion of Buddhism in professional contexts (Xuecheng 2015). This has led Ren'ai to directly engage with secular institutions like hospitals, send its volunteers to disaster-relief training sessions, and attend international conferences about social work. This not only builds legitimacy with the government, as discussed in the previous section, but also assures the volunteers, who financially support the organization, that it is operating in an ethical, impactful, and efficient manner. This "industrialized philanthropy" also shields Ren'ai from scandals in the charitable sector and allegations of corruption within religious organizations.

Ren'ai's events are designed to be highly inclusive, which serves to broaden their potential recruitment base to embrace non-Buddhists. The principle of "charity for all" (*renren cishan* 人人慈善) means that Ren'ai attempts to include people from all walks of life (Xuecheng 2015). One volunteer said that Ren'ai differed from charities like Tzu Chi because it isn't "high-end" (*gaodashang* 高大上) but deliberately sets a low barrier for entry (OFW10). The soup kitchens clearly embody this principle. Volunteers are tasked with handing out cups of soup on the street and wishing recipients a day of positive emotions. The simplicity of this exchange makes it inclusive, and simultaneously serves as an outstretched hand for new volunteers free of ideological prerequisites. Many volunteers I spoke to were recipients of this cup of "compassion congee" (McCarthy 2013) before they became volunteers themselves. According to the General Secretary, development is achieved through diversity (*heshi-shengwu* 和实生物), not through sameness (*tongzhexu* 同则不继) (OFW9).

---

8 This term seems to have been used in policy documents during the Hu-Wen era, but it is also used in Buddhist contexts to refer to actions, speech, and thought.

This explains why the soup kitchens are located not only in poor areas, but also in some of Beijing's most affluent suburbs. Grassroots volunteers who I interacted with at soup stations included everyone from bus drivers to top executives. While membership in small Buddhist study groups requires a level of belief and loyalty, Ren'ai's events are purposefully designed to remove these barriers. Lay Buddhists explicitly avoid religious language, including the traditional Buddhist greeting *amitufo* (阿弥陀佛). However, the form and function of the religious and non-religious networks have much in common. Just as social capital is generated in small Buddhist study groups, soup stations build strong ties between fellow religious and non-religious volunteers. The fact that over fifty of these soup kitchens also organize a group study after the event itself is another striking point of similarity. The overlap of individuals between Ren'ai's networks leads individuals to move from soup kitchens to Buddhist study groups, and sometimes even the monastic network. It is telling that six volunteers from Ren'ai's first soup kitchen have now been ordained as Buddhist clergy under Xuecheng (OFWS).

Ren'ai's hybridity is also manifest in the blurring of boundaries between volunteers and recipients. Informed by the Buddhist doctrine of *anatta*, or non-self, the leadership encourages volunteers to move beyond dualistic understandings of the self and others, seeing recipients not as victims but instead as fellow sentient beings who can also be liberated from their suffering. During training sessions for first-time volunteers this is expressed in secular terms, encouraging them not to see aid recipients as victims and themselves as saviors, but to see both parties as equals. The slogan "helping others is helping yourself" means that it is only natural for volunteers to see joining Ren'ai as a solution to individual suffering, with one volunteer suggesting that everyone should join Ren'ai because Buddha nature is within us all (OFW11). The structure of the educational assistance program puts this principle into practice. Children are identified while they are in primary school and visited every few months, all the way until they graduate from high school. These children and their families are continuously welcomed by Ren'ai and casually encouraged to join. During the trip I attended, several former recipients and their family members were now volunteers. In fact, one of the central organizers was a young man who had been a beneficiary of the program since primary school. He now spends much of his time volunteering with the organization and goes to Xuecheng's temple frequently. The same strategy of blurring structural boundaries is used at environmental protection stations, where cooperation with schools attempts to cultivate a new generation of volunteers.

In sum, we see that Ren'ai benefits from both the presence and absence of Buddhism within its hybrid organizational structure by allowing fluid

interaction between its sacred monastic, lay, and secular philanthropic networks. In the following section we will see how this strategy of hybridity plays out in the cultivation of volunteer identities.

## Hybrid Morality and Volunteer Identities

### *A Pluralistic Moral Landscape*

After the Maoist moral monopoly on utopian socialist ethics was hollowed out by the state in the 1980s, the perception of a moral vacuum and the influx of market values has led many to see the last four decades through the lens of moral decline. According to some scholars, hedonistic individualism, materialism, and ultra-utilitarianism have filled the gap left in individuals' understanding of the good (Y. Yan 2003; Ci 1994; Wang 2002). Stories of good Samaritans who are exploited by "uncivil individuals" (Y. Yan 2009) and dying children being ignored by pedestrians (Osno 2015) are often presented as evidence of a moral crisis in contemporary China. Official corruption, crime, and prostitution are also seen as emblematic of an erosion of individual moral integrity within this paradigm (Osburg 2013). However, just as the moral purity of the "new socialist man" (Chen 1969) in the Mao era fails to capture reality, the narrative of moral decline is also incomplete. It is undeniable that the social, economic, and political upheavals of the last century have led to radical changes in "behaviour norms, values, and moral reasoning" (Yan 2009:9), and while market values have become ubiquitous in recent decades, China's contemporary moral topography is increasingly pluralistic, offering individuals a plethora of ethical resources to draw on. In fact, the very perception of moral decay has encouraged ethical countercurrents that complicate this narrative, as people embark on the process of "moral selving": "the work of creating oneself as a more virtuous, and often more spiritual person" (Allahyari 2000:5). The desire to lead ethical lives that go beyond self-serving hedonism has underpinned growth trends within religious and philanthropic communities. The following three profiles illustrate the diversity of ethical journeys that lead individuals to Ren'ai.

Ms. Zhang is in her early thirties and occupies a senior position in Ren'ai's headquarters in Beijing. Before starting to volunteer with Ren'ai, she had been a volunteer at a non-religious NGO; she had grown up in a Buddhist family, but was never very devout. Zhang now spends most of her time volunteering at Ren'ai and has a partner who is able to support her. Since joining Ren'ai, Zhang has become a devout follower of Xuecheng. When his voice played from her phone, she closed her eyes and chanted the Buddha's name. During my

interactions with Zhang, she recommended a meditation app, gave me books authored by the Master, and once invited me to trace outlines of the bodhisattva Ksitigarbha, a traditional activity that, like copying out Sutras, is supposed to generate Buddhist merit. Zhang would often take care of other volunteers when they were sick and is highly admired by fellow volunteers. She sees her social engagement as a crucial part of her cultivation on the bodhisattva path, which involves liberating all sentient beings from suffering.

Ms. Ling is a thirty-eight-year-old who works in human resources at a company in Beijing. She told me that her only previous experience of charity was donating blood, and that non-government grassroots charities like Ren'ai had only emerged in the twenty-first century. Ling was introduced to Ren'ai by a Buddhist friend and was aware that Ren'ai has a lot of Buddhist volunteers. While she professes no "religious belief" (*zongjiao xinyang* 宗教信仰), Ling respects Buddhism and believes that "good acts have good rewards" (*shanyoushanbao* 善有善报). Initially she attended one educational assistance trip as a volunteer, and after missing the subsequent trip she was contacted by a Ren'ai volunteer who told her that the children asked where she was and whether she would come back. She was incredibly moved that they remembered her and has not missed a trip since. By the time I met her she was a team leader within the program. She told me that many of her friends with children were interested when she posted about Ren'ai on WeChat. Citing the prevalence of single-child families, Ling and her friends view volunteering as a valuable moral education for the next generation. She told me that she has experienced personal growth by attending Ren'ai events, and in the future she hopes to get involved with the daily soup kitchen.

Mr. Cao is a CCP member in his eighties, the son of a high-level Communist Party official, and a somewhat eccentric man. After missing school during the Cultural Revolution, he served as a soldier for six years and then took the high school entrance exam when it was reinstated in 1977, going on to become a mathematics teacher. The parents of one of his students introduced him to Ren'ai three years ago. Ren'ai provides him with a community to belong to. During the educational assistance trip, Cao helped children with their math homework and would often tell the story of his perfect exam score in high school. During the pandemic, Cao volunteered with the local neighborhood committee, sitting at checkpoints and taking people's temperature, because according to him, "Party members should take on these kinds of responsibilities." When asked about religion, Cao responded that he is an atheist, and instead worships (*chongbai* 崇拜) Mao Zedong. Mao's call to "serve the people" inspires him to this day, and he views his contributions to Ren'ai within that moral framework. The ability for Ren'ai's activities to be understood through

Party motifs was also manifest in the fascinating report of a 2012 visit by state officials to Longquan Monastery to study the spirit of the Mao-era icon, Lei Feng, with Ren'ai volunteers (McCarthy 2019:79).

### *Hybrid Values*

The moral discourse promoted by Ren'ai is not monolithic, nor does it destroy conflicting conceptions of the good (Weller and Wu 2016). Instead, it is a hybrid morality that allows for a spectrum of moral frameworks. This is achieved through “universal” values that have symbolic significance in a range of contexts, from the entirely secular to the explicitly religious. Love, family, and personal growth are examples of these hybrid values that are essential to Ren'ai's success in China's increasingly pluralistic moral landscape.

Love is the perfect candidate for a hybrid morality because it is used across a variety of settings in contemporary China, including religious, charitable and even state organizations (Guo 2020). The state endorses the “love of country” (*aiguo* 爱国), charities refer to donors as “people with loving hearts” (*aixinren* 爱心人士), and religious groups are increasingly adopting the motif of love in their social engagement. Every Buddhist charity I have come across in China uses the language of love in some way, following the successful examples of Tzu Chi, which promotes the concept of “Great Love” (*da'ai* 大爱), and the philosophy of love developed by one of China's most influential Protestant leaders and founder of the Amity Foundation, KH Ting (Wu 2017). The hybridity of love is aptly captured by Ren'ai's motto, “Love is everyone's common belief.” Volunteers are encouraged to use their heart (*yongxin* 用心) to spread love and care (*guanhuai* 关怀) for others. For someone with no background in Buddhism this discourse is easily comprehended through secular understandings of the good. I even met Catholic volunteers who understood this discourse easily through their own faith. For the older generation of volunteers, this morality is also legible through the lens of socialist morality. However, among Ren'ai's Buddhist volunteers, this seemingly secular discourse is understood in terms of cultivating Bodhicitta, or the enlightenment mind, an essential part of the bodhisattva path. This is often shortened to *faxin* (发心), literally sending one's heart into the world. As we can see, the strength of love as a value is its hybridity, granting space for individuals to make their own meaning.

The moral trope of the family is another good example of this polysemic discourse in action, as it resonates with multiple sets of values in contemporary China. At Ren'ai all volunteers are referred to as “family members.” One of the six departments is exclusively focused on caring for volunteers, as one would care for family members. Much effort is made to create networks that encourage volunteers to support each other through the vicissitudes of life.



I heard several stories of volunteers contributing to fellow volunteers' medical expenses, with one campaign in Fujian raising over 160,000 RMB. This version of family-based ethics is couched in familiar language, given the traditional importance of the family in Chinese culture (Hamilton and Zheng 1992), but extends individuals' field of concern beyond traditional boundaries, including them in a "family" of hundreds, if not thousands. In Confucian thought, the family is seen as a model for the state, and the metaphor of family is often endorsed by the government today, as seen in the slogan "One Family Under Heaven" (*tianxia yijia* 天下一家; China Daily 2018). Family is also symbolically potent in a Buddhist context, for slightly different reasons. The Chinese word for a Buddhist monastic is "one who left their family" (*chujiaren* 出家人) to join the monastic community (*sangha*). Therefore, the extended notion of family is understood easily by Buddhists as another word for the *sangha*, making the Ren'ai family the equivalent of a Buddhist community in their eyes. In this way the hybrid value of "family" also accommodates a multiplicity of meanings.

Another example of this hybrid morality at work is Ren'ai's emphasis on volunteer's "personal growth." On the one hand, this directly engages with the perception of moral decline, which has also become a priority of the state in recent years, as reflected in efforts to improve citizens' character quality (*suzhi* 素质) and to promote traditional Chinese virtues (Xinhua 2019). On the other hand, the Buddhist volunteers see personal growth as synonymous with spiritual cultivation (*xiuxing* 修行), and building one's capacity for compassion to move beyond the "small self" and embody the truth of non-self. This focus on self-improvement also plays into neoliberal tropes, particularly the increasing focus on the individual, seen in everything from spiritual self-help books to professional development jargon. Ren'ai's particular version of this individualist trope emphasizes the cultivation of virtues within the individual, such as persistence, compassion, and love. While this discourse shares a common language with modern capitalist values, the emphasis on spiritual growth serves as an antidote to a capitalist society in which individuals are measured by their capabilities in the market and are not rewarded for altruistic action. Just like love and family, personal growth draws on a wide variety of meanings and as such makes Ren'ai's hybrid moral discourse a highly inclusive one.

### *Identity Production*

Ren'ai uses its hybrid moral discourse to subtly present Buddhist understandings of the good to volunteers through the "emotional work" (Perry 2002) of group sharing, which can have transformative effects on the individual.

Sharing sessions are a feature of every Ren'ai event. During the Covid-19 pandemic, I attended sharing sessions with groups across the country. Sharing

sessions create discourse spaces in which members from all levels of the organization share stories about their experiences. During my first meeting at the Ren'ai headquarters, the deputy secretary stressed the power of telling stories and proceeded to ask each executive member to share their own inspirational tales. These stories function like parables about the Ren'ai spirit, reinforcing the key elements of the volunteer identity and nudging individuals toward Buddhist cultivation. While framed in secular language, the messages within these stories are always grounded in Buddhist ethics, be it cultivating compassion or moving beyond selfish individualism. Senior volunteers' accounts of personal growth, improved personal lives, and deep fulfilment serve as models for fellow volunteers, and through an iterative process of listening and speaking, Buddhist ethics are subtly woven into the fabric of the sharing sessions.

Emotion is a key to the success of this strategy. Being deeply "emotionally moved" (*gandong* 感动) is another theme present in all sharing sessions. Stories often elicit emotional responses from fellow volunteers, and on several occasions I was surprised to find myself shedding tears. During that same meeting at Ren'ai's headquarters, an aspiring member of the executive broke down in tears while sharing a story about being late for the soup station on a snowy day. The volunteer leading the session, entirely unfazed, asked her, "How many cups of soup did your team distribute that day?" After she responded, he pointed out that this was evidence of her using her heart, complimenting her display of dedication and care. Much as the presence of impoverished children in charity advertisements encourages donations, emotional stories about disaster relief efforts after the Wenchuan earthquake or experiences assisting orphans in rural areas inspire increased commitment among Ren'ai's volunteers. These stories often highlight the efforts of particular volunteers. For example, during one online sharing session, a volunteer emotionally described the kindness of a senior volunteer who paid visits to her father while she was not around. When responding to her thanks, the senior volunteer said that "your father is my father," in what was a highly moving exchange.

Through the ritualistic sharing of emotional stories and the standard-setting functions of the stories told by the leadership, this volunteer identity can become highly transformative. One volunteer explained that after attending Ren'ai's events and studying their philosophy of the five reductions,<sup>9</sup> she realized "consumption was meaningless," downsized her house, became obsessed with minimizing waste, and became highly critical of other women who were concerned about the latest luxury handbag. She concluded by exclaiming, "I'm

---

9 This is the slogan for the environmental stations.

not even worried about leaving my husband now!” (FW2). At a group study session with soup-kitchen volunteers, one elderly volunteer said that the moral teachings at Ren'ai were different from the perfunctory moral education at his work unit (*danwei* 单位) because Ren'ai “did not teach performative propaganda for outside consumption, but how to be a human being (*zuoren* 做人)” (FW3). As this “emotional work” deepens an individual’s belief in Ren'ai values, they are increasingly likely to come into contact with Buddhism.

### Conclusion

This article has investigated the growth of one of China’s most important RICOS in the twenty-first century, Ren'ai. I have argued that Ren'ai strategically blurs the distinction between the sacred and the secular, creating a hybrid organization that benefits from both the presence and absence of “religion.” Ren'ai’s hybridity—manifested in its public image, internal networks, and moral discourse—has allowed it to expand into secular settings, while simultaneously strengthening and expanding the Buddhist community at its core.

Empirically, this article has shed light on the state of the RICO sector, which in turn helps us better understand China’s “associational revolution” and religious revival. Buddhists are revealed to be in constant negotiation with the secular state, and religious philanthropy has played an important role in a political merit-making strategy that has expanded the space for Buddhist cultivation in the twenty-first century. At an organizational level, the bidirectional flows of social and spiritual capital between Ren'ai’s monastic, lay, and secular networks reveal the continued dynamism of China’s religious and non-government organizations and the power of hybrid structures. This research also sheds light on the emerging ethical countercurrents in China’s increasingly pluralistic moral topography, and the ways in which hybrid moral communities can expand the influence of religious ideas.

Theoretically, the framework of sacred-secular hybridity presents a new way to understand the category of religion in contemporary China. The rigid distinction between the sacred and the secular is frustrated by a country that is paradoxically undergoing “secularization and religionization” at the same time (Weller 2006:44). The language of hybridity allows us to capture the subtle ways religious organizations engage with contemporary society. The sacred is both present and absent at Ren'ai, at times concealed by secular structures, but also thriving through hundreds of interwoven networks of individuals who imagine the meaning of their behavior in various shades of sacred-secular hybridity. This framework does not abandon the categories of sacred and secular, but

investigates the way these contested categories are used by state and non-state actors. Ren'ai exploits the rigid distinction between the sacred and the secular through its hybrid strategy, blurring the lines between the two. It has long been clear that the category of religion and the process of secularization are not universal constants, but instead deeply embedded within political and cultural contexts. This article has extended this analysis, showing how the contest over these categories is essential to the development of religious philanthropy, as well as the proliferation and survival of Buddhism in contemporary China.

This article is limited in its scope, but the framework of hybridity has the potential for further applications in the field of religious philanthropy and beyond. In-depth studies into the internal and external strategies of faith-based organizations in China could provide valuable data to corroborate the findings presented here. The framework of hybridity has potential applications in the historical study of Chinese Buddhism, where there seems to be strong evidence for blurring of religion and culture, religion and science, and even religion and politics. Similar hybrid negotiations within traditions like Daoism, Christianity, Confucianism, and folk religion could also be explored. Other studies on China's contemporary religious revival may also benefit from the concept of hybridity, particularly as an explanation for the rise of syncretic organizations within the Qigong movement, and movements as diverse as National Studies, martial arts, and the popularity of astrology among affluent young people today. Hybridity within the broader NGO sector and the private sector are also worthwhile future research directions, especially as the state-society binary becomes increasingly fraught. Hybridity also has applications beyond China studies, as an explanation of religious institution's adaptations to an ever-changing world.

## References

- Ahmed, E. 2005. "A Dangerous Mix: Religion and Development Aid." Challenging Fundamentalism: A Web Resource for Human Rights. <https://www.scribd.com/document/56730261/Ahmed-A-Dangerous-Mix-Religion-Development-Aid> (accessed March 12, 2020).
- Akintola, O. 2011. "What Motivates People to Volunteer? The Case of Volunteer AIDS Caregivers in Faith-Based Organizations in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa." *Health Policy and Planning* 26 (1): 53–62.
- Allahyari, R. A. 2000. *Visions of Charity: Volunteer Workers and Moral Community*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Asad, T. 1993. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Ashiwa, Y., and Wank, D. L. 2005. "The Globalization of Chinese Buddhism: Clergy and Devotee Networks in the Twentieth Century." *International Journal of Asian Studies* 2 (1): 217–237.
- Ashiwa, Y., and Wank, D. L. 2009. *Making Religion, Making the State: The Politics of Religion in Modern China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Askeland, H., G. Espedal, and S. Sirris. 2020. "Values as Vessels of Religion? The Role of Values in Everyday Work at Faith-Based Organizations." *Diaconia* 10 (1): 27–49.
- BAC. 2014. "Buddhist Association of China Charity Ideals and Contemporary Practice and Establishment" (中国佛教的慈善理念及在当代的实践和设想). <http://www.chinabuddhism.com.cn/WFB27th/zt/2014-10-17/7126.html> (accessed November 25, 2019).
- Baker, C., and G. Smith. 2011. "Spiritual, Religious and Social Capital—Exploring Their Dimensions and Their Relationship with Faith-Based Motivation and Participation in UK Civil Society." Paper presented to the BSA Sociology of Religion Group Conference, Edinburgh, April 2010.
- Barden-O'Fallon, J. 2017. "Availability of Family Planning Services and Quality of Counseling by Faith-Based Organizations: A Three Country Comparative Analysis," *Reprod Health* 14 (57): 478–490.
- Baxter, P., and Jack, S. 2008. "Qualitative Case Study Methodology: Study Design and Implementation for Novice Researchers." *The Qualitative Report* 12 (4): 544–559.
- Benthall, J. 2016. *Islamic Charities and Islamic Humanism in Troubled Times*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.
- Berger, P. L. 1996. "Secularism in Retreat." *The National Interest* 46 (3). <https://nationalinterest.org/article/secularism-in-retreat-336> (accessed December 20, 2019).
- Berger, P. L., and R. Hefner. 2003. "Spiritual Capital in Comparative Perspective." Paper presented at the Planning Meeting of the Spiritual Capital Research Program of the Metanexus Institute, Philadelphia, USA. [http://www.metanexus.net/spiritual\\_capital/pdf/Berger.pdf](http://www.metanexus.net/spiritual_capital/pdf/Berger.pdf).
- Bitter Winter. 2019. "Shaolin Martial Arts Schools Forced to Take 'Red Road.'" Bitter Winter. <https://bitterwinter.org/martial-arts-schools-forced-to-take-red-road/> (accessed December 20, 2019).
- Brooks, J. 2010. "The Householder Elite: Buddhist Activism in Shanghai (1920–1956)." PhD diss., University of California.
- Campo, D. 2017. "A Different Buddhist Revival: The Promotion of Vinaya (jīelü) in Republican China." *Journal of Global Buddhism* 18 (26): 129–154.
- Carbonnier, G. 2013. *Religion and Development*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Carino, T. C. 2016a. "Faith-Based Organizations between Service Delivery and Social Change in Contemporary China: The Experience of Amity Foundation." *HTS Theological Studies* 72 (4).
- Carino, T. C. 2016b. "Religion, Ethics, Values, and Development in a Changing China." *The Ecumenical Review* 68: 444–452.
- Chambré, S. M. 2001. "The Changing Nature of 'Faith' in Faith-Based Organizations: Secularization and Ecumenicism in Four AIDS Organizations in New York City." *Social Service Review* 75 (3): 435–455.
- Chandler, S. 2004. *Establishing a Pure Land on Earth: The Foguang Buddhist Perspective on Modernization and Globalization*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Chau, A. Y. 2006. *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Chen, J., and Q. Lan. 2017. "The Background, Dilemma and Path for Buddhist Charities to Engage in Social Protection of the Children in Plight." *The China Nonprofit Review* 9 (2): 337–358.
- Chen, T. H. 1969. "The New Socialist Man." *Comparative Education Review* 13 (1): 88–95.
- China Daily. 2018. "Xi Jinping: One Family Under Heaven 习近平：天下一家." *China Daily*. [https://china.chinadaily.com.cn/2018-05/19/content\\_36233269.htm](https://china.chinadaily.com.cn/2018-05/19/content_36233269.htm) (accessed February 22, 2020).
- Ci, J. W. 1994. *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution: From Utopianism to Hedonism*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Clarke, G. 2018. "Faith-based Organizations and International Development in a Post-liberal World." In *Religious NGOs at the United Nations*, ed. C. Baumgart-Ochse and K. D. Wolf, 84–105. London: Routledge.
- Clarke, G., and M. Jennings. 2008. *Development, Civil Society and Faith Based Organizations: Bridging the Sacred and the Secular*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Coser, R. L. 1975. "The Complexity of Roles as a Seedbed of Individual Autonomy." In *The Idea of Social Structure: Papers in Honor of Robert K. Merton*, ed. L. A. Coser, 237–263. London: Routledge.
- Deneulin, S., and M. Bano. 2009. *Religion in Development: Rewriting the Secular Script*. London: Zed Books.
- Dobbelaere, K. 1981. *Secularization: A Multi-Dimensional Concept*. London: Sage Publications.
- Dobbs, P. J. E. 2019. "How Theology Shapes Practice in Faith-Based Organizations Supporting Families in New Zealand." PhD diss., Department of Sociology, Otago University.
- Duara, P. 1995. *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Duara, P. 2001. "The Discourse of Civilization and Pan-Asianism." *Journal of World History* 12 (1): 99–130.
- Duff, J., M. Battcock, A. Karam, and A. R. Taylor. 2016. "High-Level Collaboration between the Public Sector and Religious and Faith-Based Organizations: Fad or Trend?" *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* 14 (3): 95–100.
- Ebaugh, H. R., J. S. Chafetz, and P. F. Pipes. 2006. "Where's the Faith in Faith-based Organizations? Measures and Correlates of Religiosity in Faith-based Social Service Coalitions." *Social Forces* 84 (4): 2259–2272.
- Fielder, C. 2019. "Religiously Inspired Charitable Organizations (RICOs) and Their Quest for Religious Authority and Recognition in Contemporary China." *Asian Ethnology* 78 (1): 75–100.
- Fisher, G. 2014. *From Comrades to Bodhisattvas: Moral Dimensions of Lay Buddhist Practice in Contemporary China*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Fleischer, F. 2011. "Technology of Self, Technology of Power. Volunteering as Encounter in Guangzhou, China." *Ethnos* 76 (3): 300–325.
- Gallet, W. 2016. "Christian Mission or an Unholy Alliance? The Changing Role of Church-related Organizations in Welfare-to-Work Service Delivery." PhD diss., School of Social and Political Sciences, Melbourne University.
- Glosnek, S. 2017. "Comparing Christian FBOs and Secular NGOs in Guatemala: A Qualitative Assessment of Individual Motivations and Organizational Effectiveness." PhD diss., Department of Political Science, University of Guelph.
- Goossaert, V. 2006. "1898: The Beginning of the End for Chinese Religion?" *The Journal of Asian Studies* 65 (2): 307–335.
- Goossaert, V., and D. A. Palmer. 2011. *The Religious Question in Modern China*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Goron, C. 2018. "Ecological Civilisation and the Political Limits of a Chinese Concept of Sustainability." *China Perspectives*: 25–38.
- Guo, T. 2020. "Politics of Love: Love as a Religious and Political Discourse in Modern China through the Lens of Political Leaders." *Critical Research on Religion* 8 (1): 39–52.
- Hamilton, G. G., and Z. Wang. 1992. "Introduction: Fei Xiaotong and the Beginnings of a Chinese Sociology." In *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society*, by Fei Xiaotong, 1–36. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hammerstrom, E. 2015. *The Science of Chinese Buddhism: Early Twentieth-Century Engagements*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hefferan, T., J. Adkins, and L. Occhipinti. 2009. *Bridging the Gaps: Faith-Based Organizations, Neoliberalism, and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

- Herbert, D. 2003. *Religion and Civil Society: Rethinking Public Religion in the Contemporary World*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Hsu, C. L. 2008. "‘Rehabilitating Charity’ in China: The Case of Project Hope and the Rise of Non-Profit Organizations." *Journal of Civil Society* 4 (2): 81–96.
- Huang, J. 2009. *Charisma and Compassion: Cheng Yen and the Buddhist Tzu Chi Movement*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Jeavons, T. H. 1993. "Identifying Characteristics of ‘Religious’ Organizations" (PONPO Working Paper 197). New Haven, CT: Yale University Program on Non-Profit Organizations.
- Jeavons, T. H. 2004. "Religious and Faith-Based Organizations: Do We Know One When We See One?" *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 33: 140–145.
- Ji, Z. 2008. "Secularization as Religious Restructuring: Statist Institutionalization of Chinese Buddhism and Its Paradoxes." In *Chinese Religiosities: Afflictions of Modernity and State Formation*, ed. M. M. Yang, 233–260. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ji, Z. 2012. "Chinese Buddhism as a Social Force: Reality and Potential of Thirty Years of Revival." *Chinese Sociological Review* 45 (2): 8–26.
- Ji, Z. 2015. "Secularization without Secularism: The Political-Religious Configuration of Post-1989 China." In *Atheist Secularism and Its Discontents*, ed. T. T. T. Ngo and J. B. Quijada, 92–111. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ji, Z. 2017. "Comrade Zhao Puchu: Bodhisattva under the Red Flag." In *Making Saints in Modern China*, ed. D. Ownby, V. Goossaert, and Z. Ji, 312–348. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Johnson, I. 2017. "Is a Buddhist Group Changing China? Or Is China Changing It?" *New York Times*, June 24. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/24/world/asia/china-buddhism-fo-guang-shan.html> (accessed March 20, 2020).
- Jones, B., and M. Petersen. 2011. "Instrumental, Narrow, Normative? Reviewing Recent Work on Religion and Development." *Third World Quarterly* 32 (7): 1291–1306.
- Kiely, J., and J. Brooks. 2016. *Recovering Buddhism in Modern China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- King, S. 2018. "The Ethics of Engaged Buddhism in Asia." In *The Oxford Handbook of Buddhist Ethics*, ed. D. Cozort and J. M. Shields, 479–500. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Koh, H., and E. Coles. 2019. "Body and Soul: Health Collaborations with Faith-Based Organizations." *American Journal of Public Health* 109 (3): 369–370.
- Kuah-Pearce, K. E. 2014. "Understanding Suffering and Giving Compassion: The Reach of Socially Engaged Buddhism into China." *Anthropology and Medicine* 21 (1): 27–42.



- Lai, W., J. Zhu, L. Tao, and A. Spires. 2015. "Bounded by the State: Government Priorities and the Development of Private Philanthropic Foundations in China." *The China Quarterly* 224: 1083–1092.
- Lai, Y. 2018. "The Folk Belief, Charitable Undertakings and Belief Economy of Chaoshan Charitable Temples: The Triple-Agent Model of Shantou XY Charitable Temple's Operation as an Example." *The China Nonprofit Review* 10 (1): 161–190.
- Laliberté, A. 2003. "Love Transcends Borders or Blood is Thicker than Water? The Charity Work of the Compassion Relief Foundation in the People's Republic of China." *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 2:243–261.
- Laliberté, A. 2004. *The Politics of Buddhist Organizations in Taiwan, 1989–2003: Safeguarding the Faith, Building a Pure Land, Helping the Poor*. London: Routledge.
- Laliberté, A. 2009. "The Institutionalization of Buddhist Philanthropy in China." In *State and Society Responses to Social Welfare Needs in China: Serving the People*, ed. J. Schwartz and S. Shieh, 113–134. London: Routledge.
- Laliberté, A. 2012. "Buddhist Charities and China's Social Policy." *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 158:95–117.
- Laliberté, A. 2022. "The Ren'ai Charity Foundation." In *Religion and China's Welfare Regimes*, by A. Laliberté, 283–309. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Laliberté, A., D. Palmer, and K. Wu. 2011. "Social Services, Philanthropy and Religion in Chinese Society." In *Chinese Religious Life*, ed. D. Palmer, G. Shive, and P. Wikeri, 139–154. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lei, S. H. 2014. *Neither Donkey nor Horse: Medicine in the Struggle over China's Modernity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Leutner, M., and I. Goikhma. 2014. *State, Society and Governance in Republican China*. LIT Verlag Münster.
- Lewis, V. A., C. A. MacGregor, and R. D. Putnam. 2013. "Religion, Networks, and Neighborliness: The Impact of Religious Social Networks on Civic Engagement." *Social Science Research* 42 (2): 331–346.
- Liao, P. 2012. "The Mediating Role of Mediatized Religious Contents: An Example of Buddhist Institutional Use of Prime-Time Dramas." *Australian Journal of Communication* 39 (1): 37–51.
- Long, Z. 2016. "Managing Legitimacy Crisis for State-Owned Non-Profit Organization: A Case Study of the Red Cross Society of China." *Public Relations Review* 42 (2): 372–374.
- Lu, S., J. Rios, and C. Huang. 2016. "Mindfully Sharing Capital in Modern China." *The China Nonprofit Review* 8 (1): 52–65.
- Luova, O. 2011. "Community Volunteers' Associations in Contemporary Tianjin: Multi-purpose Partners of the Party-state." *Journal of Contemporary China* 20 (72): 773–794.
- Madsen, R. 2007. *Democracy's Dharma: Religious Renaissance and Political Development in Taiwan*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Madsen, R. 2009. "Back to the Future: Pre-modern Religious Policy in Postsecular China." Templeton Lecture on Religion and World Affairs. <http://old.fpri.org/articles/2009/03/back-future-pre-modernreligious-policy-post-secular-china> (accessed March 25, 2020).
- McCarthy, S. K. 2013. "Serving Society, Repurposing the State: Religious Charity and Resistance in China." *The China Journal* 70:48–72.
- McCarthy, S. K. 2019. "Spiritual Technologies and the Politics of Buddhist Charity." In *Buddhism after Mao*, ed. J. Zhe, G. Fisher, and A. Laliberté, 77–96 Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- O'Neill, M. 2010. *Tzu Chi: Serving With Compassion*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Osburg, J. 2013. *Anxious Wealth*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Osnos, E. 2015. *Age of Ambition: Chasing Fortune, Truth, and Faith in the New China*. New York: Macmillan.
- Parsons, T. 1966. *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Patton, M. 1990. *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*. 2nd ed. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Perry, E. J. 2002. "Moving the Masses: Emotion Work in the Chinese Revolution." *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 7 (2): 111–128.
- Pittman, D. A. 2001. *Toward a Modern Chinese Buddhism: Taixu's Reforms*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Salamon, Lester M. 1994. "The Rise of the Nonprofit Sector." *Foreign Affairs* 73 (4): 109–122.
- SARA. 2012. "Advice on Encouraging and Regulating the Religious Sector's Participation in Philanthropic and Charitable Activities" (关于鼓励和规范宗教界从事公益慈善活动的意见). [http://www.gov.cn/zwggk/2012-02/27/content\\_2077338.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zwggk/2012-02/27/content_2077338.htm), no. 6.
- Schmid, H. 2013. "Nonprofit Human Services: Between Identity Blurring and Adaptation to Changing Environments." *Administration in Social Work* 37: 242–256.
- Shue, V. 2011. "The Political Economy of Compassion: China's 'Charity Supermarket' Saga." *Journal of Contemporary China* 20 (72): 751–772.
- Sider, R. J., and H. R. Unruh. 2004. "Typology of Religious Characteristics of Social Service and Educational Organizations and Programs." *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 33 (1): 109–134.
- Singletary, J. E. 2003. "A Constructivist Inquiry of Church-State Relationships for Faith-Based Organizations." PhD diss., School of Social Work, Virginia Commonwealth University.
- Smith, J. H. 2009. *The Art of Doing Good Charity in Late Ming China*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Spires, A. J. 2018. "Chinese Youth and Alternative Narratives of Volunteering." *China Information* 32 (2): 203–223.

- Stark, R. 1999. "Secularization, R.I.P." *Sociology of Religion* 60 (3): 249–273.
- Strong, J., and S. Strong. 1973. "Report from China: A Post-Cultural Revolution Look at Buddhism." *China Quarterly* 54: 321–330.
- Sun, Y. 2011. "The Chinese Buddhist Ecology in Post-Mao China: Contours, Types and Dynamics." *Social Compass* 58 (4): 498–510.
- Thornton, P. M. 2013. "The Advance of the Party: Transformation or Takeover of Urban Grassroots Society?" *The China Quarterly* 213: 1–18.
- Torry, M. 2017. *Managing God's Business: Religious and Faith-Based Organizations and their Management*. London: Routledge.
- Travagnin, S. 2017. "Buddhist Education between Tradition, Modernity and Networks: Reconsidering the 'Revival' of Education for the Saṅgha in Twentieth-Century China." *Studies in Chinese Religions* 3 (3): 220–241.
- Wang, X. Y. 2002. "The Post-Communist Personality: The Spectre of China's Capitalist Market Reforms." *The China Journal* 47: 1–17.
- Weber, M. 1905. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Routledge Classics. London: Routledge, 2001.
- Welch, H. 1968. *The Buddhist Revival in China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Weller, R. P., C. J. Huang, K. Wu, and L. Fan. 2017. *Religion and Charity: The Social Life of Goodness in Chinese Societies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wilson, B. 1966. *Religion in Secular Society*. Harmondsworth, UK: Pelican.
- Wu, K. 2015. "Negotiating the 'Grey Zone': Buddhist and Protestant Philanthropies in Contemporary Southeast China." In *Religion and the Politics of Development*, ed. P. Fountain, R. Bush, and R. M. Feener, 129–154. Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan.
- Wu, K. 2017. "The Philanthropic Turn of Religions in Post-Mao China: Bureaucratization, Professionalization, and the Making of a Moral Subject." *Modern China* 43 (4): 425–455.
- Xuecheng, Ven. 2015. *The Power of Benevolence: Great Master Xuecheng Discusses Charity*. 善的力量：学诚大和尚谈慈善. Beijing: Sino-Culture Press.
- Xinhua. 2018. "White Paper: China's Religious Sector Enthusiastically Engages in Charitable and Philanthropic Activities" 白皮书：我国宗教界积极从事公益慈善活动. Xinhuanet. [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-04/03/c\\_1122631216.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-04/03/c_1122631216.htm) (accessed March 21, 2020).
- Xinhua. 2019. "CCCPC State Council Publishes Outline for Constructing Citizen Morality for the New Age" 中共中央 国务院印发《新时代公民道德建设实施纲要》. Xinhuanet. [http://www.xinhuanet.com/2019-10/27/c\\_1125158665.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/2019-10/27/c_1125158665.htm) (accessed April 20, 2020).
- Xu, B. 2017. *The Politics of Compassion: The Sichuan Earthquake and Civic Engagement in China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Yan, Y. 2009. "The Good Samaritan's New Trouble: A Study of the Changing Moral Landscape in Contemporary China." *Social Anthropology* 17 (1): 9–24.

Yan, Y. X. 2003. *Private Life under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village, 1949–1999*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Yang, F. G. 2004. "Between Secularist Ideology and Desecularizing Reality: The Birth and Growth of Religious Research in Communist China." *Sociology of Religion* 65 (2): 101–119.

Yao, Y. S. 2012. *Taiwan's Tzu Chi as Engaged Buddhism*. Leiden: Global Oriental.

Yao, Y. S., and R. Gombrich. 2018. "Christianity as Model and Analogue in the Formation of the 'Humanistic' Buddhism of Tàì Xū and Hsīng Yún." *Buddhist Studies Review* 34 (2): 205–237.

Yavuz, M. H. 2003. *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Yin, R. K. 2003. *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Zhang, J., and Z. Ji. 2018. "Lay Buddhism in Contemporary China: Social Engagements and Political Regulations." *China Review* 18 (4): 11–39.

### Appendix: Empirical Data Coding System

Key: IN—Interview, FW—Fieldwork, OFW—Online Fieldwork

Code	Date	Description
IN1	17/12/19	Interview with the general secretary at Ren'ai's HQ in Beijing.
IN2	25/04/20	Interview with one of the first four volunteers at Ren'ai, currently a Buddhist monastic.
IN3	21/04/20	Interview with Ms. Zhang.
IN4	14/07/20	Interview with Ms. Ling.
IN5	24/07/20	Interview with Mr. Cao.
FW1	17/12/19	Visit to HQ, meeting with the executive.
FW2	17/12/19	Visit to a vegetarian restaurant where volunteers from the environmental station, educational assistance, and emergency assistance shared their stories with the executive.
FW3	19/12/19	Participant observation at the first ever Soup Station. The session began by chanting the "volunteer training principles" (志愿者培训理念), and afterward I attended a group study session with the volunteers at one of their houses, where we read the Confucian <i>Analects</i> .

*(cont.)*


---

<b>Code</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Description</b>
FW4	04/01/20– 05/01/20	Educational assistance trip to a county in Hebei Province. Visited the homes of several aid recipients and attended the dinner/talent show/sharing session with representatives from the local government.
FW5	06/01/20	Hanging out at the tea shop of a volunteer with other members of Ren'ai.
OFW1	31/03/20	Online sharing session with volunteers from Dongbei.
OFW2	01/04/20	First online meeting introducing the palliative care programs.
OFW3	07/04/20	Online sharing session with volunteers from Shanghai
OFW4	08/04/20	Principles Class taught by the general secretary for the core volunteers, based on Xuecheng's writing on charity.
OFW5	14/04/20	Online sharing session with volunteers from Fujian.
OFW6	15/04/20	Second online meeting introducing the palliative care programs.
OFW7	21/04/20	Online sharing session with volunteers from Fujian (Quanzhou and Putian).
OFW6	21/04/20	Hanging out at the tea shop of a volunteer with other members of Ren'ai and sharing dinner.
OFW8	22/04/20	Principles Class.
OFW9	28/04/20	Online sharing session with volunteers from Hunan.
OFW10	06/05/20	Principles Class.
OFW11	16/05/20	Principles Class.

---