

Spring 2013

# Model Minority on the Modernization Project: Images of Chinese Religiosity in America

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## Recommended Citation

Wu, Emily, "Model Minority on the Modernization Project: Images of Chinese Religiosity in America" (2013). *Collected Faculty and Staff Scholarship*. 267.

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**Model Minority on the Modernization Project: Images of Chinese Religiosity in America**  
Presented at ASCH (American Society of Church History) Spring Conference in Portland, OR,  
2013.

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As the stereotypical model minority in the United States, Chinese Americans are rarely considered as religiously threatening. Those Chinese Americans who already were or became converted to mainstream Christianity are seen as cases of successful Americanization. Buddhism, another popular religious affiliation among the Chinese ethnics, is understood as a benign and respectable source of wisdom. Few Chinese ethnics identify themselves strictly as Daoist or Confucian, but there is a wide range of religious and spiritual practices that are diffused into their daily lives. Without specific religious affiliations or congregational headcount, eclectic practices such as ancestral worship, temple visits, home rituals, and healing methods are interpreted (both by observers and insiders) to be merely preserving ethnic heritage and revisiting cultural tradition. In this paper, I will explore how the American mainstream and Chinese religious communities construct the image of Chinese Americans as socially participating and culturally inclusive, and therefore modernized, citizens. The two examples will demonstrate two models—one internally defined model by the Chinese American community, and another externally defined model by the mainstream American community.

Buddhists in the United States are often perceived as passive and individual-oriented, and Chinese American Buddhists who stay within the ethnic community rarely meddle with local politics. My first case study, the Tzu Chi Foundation, broke out of that stereotype by promoting charity as practice of compassion, a new model that deeply engages its followers in providing social services.

Tzu Chi, or Compassionate Relief, was founded in rural Taiwan by Master Zhengyen in 1966 as a grass root movement participated mostly by lay Buddhist women. Zhengyen's vision was to create a path of Buddhist practice that can include the participation of all members of the society, and provide services to those who are not reached by the standard social aids. Her first successful campaign was to call upon 30 stay-at-home moms in the neighborhood to save the spare change from their grocery money, and pool all that change together for those in need. Besides monetary contributions, the moms also served the community by doing what they could—cooking to feed those in need of food, chanting sutras for families whose loved ones were dying, helping to keep the neighborhood clean, and generally reaching out to others who need their assistance in the community. Over the decades, the network of neighborhood moms grew into an international network of approximately 10 million members and volunteers, still with the emphasis on serving the community out of compassion for others.

In the United States, Tzu Chi has offices in most metropolitan areas with sizable Chinese ethnic population. Although these offices offer public classes on Buddhist teachings, the followers take more pride identifying themselves as volunteers who participate in services provided to local communities in need, and relief efforts for large-scale disasters. A subsidiary medical foundation runs 6 community clinics nationwide, and also organizes teams of professional medical volunteers and disembarks them worldwide for regularly scheduled and emergency services. Finally, the foundation has 18 academies that offer classes in Chinese language, culture, arts, and Buddhist teachings to children and teenagers.

Tzu Chi maintains the image of a quietly giving Buddhist organization that brings packages and donations to victims in need, with minimum effort to evangelize. The foundation's academies also resemble secular weekend language schools in the Chinese American

communities, and the Buddhist part of the education is only optional. Furthermore, rather than teaching the classical sutras, the foundation's Buddhist teachings focus on sharing wisdom quotes from Master Zhengyen, and stories of how its members practice compassion through action. Tzu Chi's model of giving and serving as demonstration of compassion works well with the American mainstream portrayal of Chinese ethnics as the model minority—a minority group gives rather than takes, and solves social problems rather than creating them. In 2011, Master Zhengyen was actually named by Times Magazine as one of the 100 most influential people in the world.

### **Dragon Boat Festival**

Social participation is only part of the model minority formula. In my second case study, the Dragon Boat Festival, I will talk about the second part of the model minority formula—being culturally inclusive, even if that means that the original culturally significant practices and interpretations are replaced by what are seen as more important, culturally-neutral activities and messages.

The Duanwu, or May 5<sup>th</sup> Festival, as the celebration is known in the Chinese communities, is a day when families perform ritual, healing, and protective practices that came from the Confucian and Daoist traditions. Dragon boat race is traditionally practiced as part the festivities, along with feasting on rice dumplings that were also offered to appease the unsettled spirits and ruling deities of the rivers and the sea. In the mainstream American context, the dragon boat race was taken up as a sport.

In the past fifteen years, an international dragon boat competition takes place in the San Francisco Bay Area. California Dragon Boat Association (CDBA), a 501 non-profit organization, has been the event organizer. Besides promoting dragon boating as a low-cost

community sport, CDBA also aims to "enhance bonding and interaction among different ethnic and cultural groups locally, nationally, and internationally."<sup>1</sup> Prior to 2005, the annual race was primarily considered as a sport event with the spectators typically gather on the lake shore for a good weekend day of barbeque picnic and some cheering. It was never so much a Chinese ethnic display; local spectators who attend the races regularly observe that, in the early years, not only were there only a few teams, the attendants to the races were mostly Caucasians.<sup>2</sup>

Since 2006, with the sponsorship of Kaiser Permanente, the event name changed to Kaiser Permanente San Francisco International Dragon Boat Festival. Health education and promotion became central to the festival. It started with booths amidst the festival vendors that provided free health consultation and sunscreen lotion, targeting the Asian ethnic communities. By 2012, the entire festival consisted of mostly health education stations and (gasp!) no "unhealthy" festival food stands at all. The only sources of edible nutrients in the entire festival were one McDonald's food truck that gave TINY samples of their fruit smoothies, and a game stand sponsored by Lucky Supermarket that gave pieces of fresh fruits as prizes for a spin-wheel dart game.

The current Kaiser Permanente Dragon Boat Festival website no longer has any mention of the root of the dragon boat festival in the traditional Chinese context. The California Dragon Boat Association website attributes the festival to the ancient Chinese legend of Qu Yuan, who was known as a patriotic yet depressed poet who drowned himself in a river in 278 B.C.E. The story provided by the CDBA paints a more romantic picture than my own rendering:

Dragon boat racing originated over 2000 years ago and embodies the story of love and service for one's country. ...For years, [Qu Yuan] wandered the countryside composing poems expressing his patriotism and love for the people. Either as an act of despair or an ultimate protest against the corrupt government, Qu Yuan threw himself into the Mei Lo

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<sup>1</sup> CDBA website: <http://www.cdba.org/index.shtml>

<sup>2</sup> From personal communications, Dec 11, 2005.

River (in today's Hunan province) on the fifth day of the fifth month in the year 278 B.C. Qu Yuan opted to commit suicide rather than lose face and honor by serving a corrupt government.<sup>3</sup>

Love, service, and patriotism, the three American national mottos since the war in Iraq, are repackaged with a Chinese legend and commemorated with the sponsorship of a major healthcare provider group, local media corporations, and finally the always camera-ready mayor of the city.

Let us now consider dragon boating in the original Chinese context. The attributed death day of Qu Yuan is May 5th on the lunar calendar, or the Duanwu Festival 端午節. Interestingly, at least three other historical figures are also commemorated on the same day for various reasons.<sup>4</sup> More important than commemorating the death of ancient exemplary characters are the rituals of food offerings to the family ancestors and the demon-warding god Zhong Kui 鍾馗. On the individual level, on the day of Duanwu Festival everyone cleanses their bodies in mugwort-infused water, children wear fragrant herb-stuffed poaches, and adults drink wine mixed with flowers of sulfur. As the weather gets hotter in May and infectious diseases become more frequent, these practices are believed to effectively drive away demons, illnesses, and bad luck in general. Then, as part of the festivity, people enjoy the specially prepared rice dumplings wrapped in bamboo or lotus leaves, and watch dragon boat races if a water body suitable for the event is nearby. The rice dumplings are also taken out to the water by the dragon

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<sup>3</sup> Kaiser Permanente San Francisco International Dragon Boat Festival website: <http://www.sfdragonboat.com/history.shtml>. The legend they provide is not historically accurate. Qu Yuan was both a renowned poet and a talented politician. His wandered by the river because he was exiled from his governmental position; his protest was toward a court that did not accept his strategies (which proved to be effective and brought a few years of prosperity to his country of Chu 楚), not because he refused to serve a corrupted government.

<sup>4</sup> Wu Zixu 伍子胥, Cao E 曹娥, and Qiu Jin 秋瑾 are also regionally commemorated in China. Wu was a morally-exemplary politician (circa 490-470 BCE) who also committed suicide. Cao was a young girl from the East Han dynasty (23-220 AD) who drowned in a river for attempting to save her father. Finally, Qiu (1875-1907) was a recent addition who was admired for her courage in revolting against the Qing government.

boat racers, and offered to the spirits and deities of the rivers, lakes, and the sea in the attempt to appease them—a measure to prevent water-related injuries and deaths in the community

Understanding the original context around dragon boat racing during Duanwu, let us now shift our focus back to the San Francisco Dragon Boat Festival. It is significant to note that in the recent decades, the Duanwu Festival is commonly translated into the Dragon Boat Festival, perhaps because the term Duanwu is difficult to translate directly, and that the dragon boat is an item that is both visually striking and conceptually easy to grasp. By renaming the Dragon Boat Championships as the Dragon Boat Festival, there is now a confusion of what one can mean by Dragon Boat Festival. Does it mean the Duanwu Festival in lunar May, the international dragon boat race in September, or both? Whether it is intentional meddling or just benevolent oversight, the Chinese ritual calendar and the meaning of an important traditional festival are being redefined; the order of the Chinese cosmos is challenged.

In 2005, when I first started observing this festival, an orthodox Daoist priest from the Ching Chung Taoist Association of America, part of an orthodox Daoist lineage in Hong Kong, performed the all-important initiation ritual for the festival, and performed eye-painting ritual for the dragon boats. Traditionally, Daoist priests perform these rituals to ensure the safety of competitors in the race. Also consistent with traditional Daoist ritual practices, the Daoist master Jefferson Lee performed the ritual without a public speech. Starting in 2006, the Buddhist monks from the Chung Tai Zen Center of Sunnyvale became the performers of the blessing ritual of the festival. Master Jianhu, the Abbot of the Zen Center up until 2012, explained to the festival attendees that “painting the eyes of the dragons [of the boats] signifies the awakening of the pure consciousness within each of us, and compassion as well. The [ritual] blesses everyone in our global village, across the divides of cultures and religions, so that we can co-create a

society that is safe, healthy, and harmonious.”<sup>5</sup> The theme of the Asian global village continued throughout the festival, as the Zen Master’s speech was followed by performances of Japanese Taiko drummers, Filipino pop singers, Indian dancers, Muay Thai boxers, Chinese acrobats, etc. When I observed at the festival in 2010 and 2012, the Zen Masters no longer gave public speeches, nor did they paint the eyes of the dragon boats. The monks and lay members of their own community chant sutras, followed by the abbot blessing the seawater and the festival ground and attendees with sprinkles of water and rice. This blessing ritual is now the only remaining Chinese religious element of the San Francisco Dragon Boat Festival, and the Chinese Buddhist community no longer provides its interpretation of the festival.

### **The Modern Model Minority**

Since the civil rights movement, Asian American, in contrast to the resistance mode of the African and Hispanic communities, has been labeled as the model minority. The Chinese ethnic community, throughout its long history of being in the United States, tended to work with the system rather than against it. Records show that as early as during the Gold Rush in the 1870s, rather than organizing protests, the Chinese laborers would attempt to resolve conflicts with their Caucasian employers by filing legal complaints and lawsuits.<sup>6</sup> When the Chinese immigrants started to consider themselves permanent members of the American society rather than mere sojourners, they tried to assimilate to the Caucasian American standard as much as they could—parents did not teach their children Chinese in fear that they will grow up speaking English with an accent, and many converted to Christianity. It was not until the last two decade or so that the American society as a whole became more aware and respectful of the fact of

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<sup>5</sup> Translated from events page from Chung Tai Zen Center of Sunnyvale website, dated September 22, 2006. [http://ctzen.org/sunnyvale/zhTW/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=88&Itemid=70](http://ctzen.org/sunnyvale/zhTW/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=88&Itemid=70)

<sup>6</sup> See Scott Zesch, *The Chinatown War: Chinese Los Angeles and the Massacre of 1871* (London: Oxford University Press, 2012).



cultural diversity in our nation. Before that, generations of Chinese Americans intentionally tried to sever themselves from their own cultural heritage just to become more American. The painful history of Chinese exclusion from 1882 to 1943 also left a deep wound in the memory of many Chinese American families, which prompted them to strive even harder to be included in the American society.

However, the rapid globalization of our world necessitates that being Americans in this current era means not only being members of the American society, but being members of the global society as well. Chinese Americans, who once-upon-a-time used to denounce their ancestral affiliations in exchange for being included in the American society, now find themselves increasingly re-establishing connections with the Chinese cultural heritage and with other Chinese ethnic community internationally. In the example of Tzu Chi Foundation, like many Chinese American religious communities (Christian communities included), cultural and linguistic education for the younger generation is an integral part of the religious mission. On the other hand, the promotion of Buddhist ideals through grass root social actions and charitable programs is consistent with the civil society model of social participation. In sum, it is a formula that provides for social participation that connects to the American society at large, disaster relief programs that contribute to the global society, and cultural education that preserves the linguistic and religious heritage for Chinese American youngsters in the community. The social services are not provided in exchange for religious ideological conversion, yet internally the Tzu Chi community advocates for using the Buddhist-Chinese identity to tap into a global network of fellow Buddhist-Chinese global citizens. In other words, there is a localized inclusiveness that has little to do with the Buddhist or Chinese identity, yet globally the social connections and

mobilization of resources are possible only through the shared Buddhist-Chinese identity of the Tzu Chi members.

If the Tzu Chi example demonstrates an internally-defined model of modernization of Chinese religiosity with the American context, the evolution of the San Francisco International Dragon Boat Festival demonstrates an externally defined model. Unlike many other Chinese festivals celebrated and organized by the local Chinese ethnic community, such as street fairs in Chinatown for Lunar New Year and Mid-Autumn Festival, the Dragon Boat Festival started as a side-show for the sport of dragon boat competition. If American fairs and festivals can be considered as rituals in themselves—that they consist of vendors, performances, entertainment, and the sense of *communitas* of the crowd—then the San Francisco International Dragon Boat Festival, intended to be held annually, is a de-ritualized secular process that claims authority over the Duanwu Festival and molding it into another all-American experience. Stripped clean of the history, rituals, practices, and food of the Duanwu festival, the Dragon Boat Festival is re-infused with the mainstream American definitions of health, festivity, and what the Asian American identity stands for and who should be included in the community.