

**RELIGIOUS ALTERNATION, SPIRITUAL HUMANISM:
TZU CHI BUDDHIST FOUNDATION IN SINGAPORE**

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*For my loved ones -
Daddy, Mommy, Alvian, Aldrich & Ming Hui,*

*"The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen,
nor touched... but are felt in the heart" – Hellen Keller*

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"We must never cease from exploration. And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we began and to know the place for the first time." —T.S. Eliot

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Summary

As individuals search for religious options, Tzu Chi Buddhist Foundation positions itself favourably alongside trends in the religious marketplace. Despite the range of choices, Buddhism remains a popular option. This study will examine the religious and spiritual experiences of Tzu Chi members in Singapore to understand the growth and popularity of Tzu Chi Singapore. From my fieldwork data, several interesting questions are raised: Why do non-Buddhists and non-Chinese join Tzu Chi? How does Tzu Chi accommodate multi-religiosity in its organization?

This study will examine the reasons to account for Tzu Chi's appeal from an agency's perspective. I will also analyse the concept of a dual-sphere framework, social-humanistic and religious domains and the process of religious customization which makes it attractive for individuals to join Tzu Chi. Religious alternation occurs when individuals can manage their religious participation and mediate affiliations as they switch from one religious organization to another. I suggest that religious alternation is an important analytical tool to make sense of the religious change in a multi-religious and multi-ethnic organization.

Structural conditions are pertinent for an understanding of how contextual and situational factors can facilitate religious alternation. My empirical data suggests that Tzu Chi has an efficient organizational structure and a successful outreach programme. It creates a social cocoon which encapsulates members into a community with a strong sense of shared purpose. This is vital for membership growth and continual participation of its members to sustain the organization. From a macro perspective, Tzu Chi's growth is situated within the religious marketplace in Singapore. It is essential to consider the relationship of religion and the State, the nature of religious competition, the popularity of Buddhism and growth of new religions. A robust research on Tzu Chi is possible when we examine these trends in the religious economy and how it affects Tzu Chi's development in Singapore.

Using the examples of another two new religious movements in Singapore, particularly Soka Gakkai, Sathya Sai Baba, this research will show that there is a movement towards spiritual humanism in modern society. Based on primary field work in Singapore, the study will compare the three religious movements and show the shifting focus away from religiosity to spirituality and self actualization replacing ritualistic formalism. These three new religious movements share commonality in terms of universal humanism and an emphasis on social, charity and community work. This study offers a refreshing perspective on conversion, religiosity, religious affiliations and new religions in Singapore.

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Chapter 1

Religious Alternation, Spiritual Humanism

1.1 Introduction

The Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation was founded in Hualien, the east coast of Taiwan. A volunteer-based, spiritual as well as welfare organization, Tzu Chi's missions focus on giving material aid and inspiring love and humanity in both the givers and receivers. In 1966, Venerable Master Cheng Yen founded the Tzu Chi Merits Society in Hualien with thirty lay devotees, mostly housewives. Since its founding, the Foundation has dedicated itself in the field of charity, medical, education, environmental protection, as well as the promotion of humanistic values and community volunteerism. Cheng Yen claims that suffering in this world is caused by material deprivation and spiritual poverty. Tzu Chi members exhibit a high level of commitment to the belief that worldly salvation is obtainable through altruistic acts. They take on a humanistic approach towards spirituality and religion by performing charity and a this-worldly engagement with societal concerns.

In Singapore, Tzu Chi Buddhist Foundation has shown phenomenal growth from an informal group of volunteers in 1987 to 15,000 members in a short span of two decades. It started from a group consisting of mainly Taiwanese expatriates who gathered for voluntary work and informal discussions and prayers. The group grew gradually in membership and in it was officially registered and known as Buddhist Tzu Chi Merits Society (Singapore Branch) in 1991. Its explicit goal was to help the poor and needy and propagate Tzu Chi missions. The Singapore Branch has been so successful that it extended its Medical mission to Indonesian islands, Batam, Bintan and Karimun. These overseas missions organized by Tzu Chi Singapore attracted

many local Indonesian Chinese to join as Tzu Chi volunteers which even led to the establishment of a liaison office in Batam in 2005. More remarkably, the Foundation has attracted a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-national membership. Despite the use of Mandarin as the main language medium for spiritual teachings and the predominantly Buddhist symbols and ideology used in the religious ceremonies and philosophy, large numbers of Chinese-Buddhists, Taoists, Christians and Catholics are active participants in Tzu Chi. In addition, Indian-Hindus and to a lesser extent, Indian-Christians and even Malay-Muslims participate in Tzu Chi activities. These facts may seem contradictory or even jarring in a Buddhist organization where the largest group of its members is Chinese. How can we account for the rapid growth of Tzu Chi? Why do non-Buddhists and non-Chinese join Tzu Chi? Why is Tzu Chi successful in crossing boundaries in a country where religion often divides along ethnic lines? What makes Tzu Chi appealing to be able to attract a diverse membership in Singapore?

This thesis sets out to examine how Tzu Chi, a new religion, or more specifically, as I will argue in this thesis a religious humanistic movement, can attract a **multi-religious** membership and the implications for religious conversion, religious affiliation, practice and teachings on religion and Buddhism in Singapore. In a secular country, the Singapore government has significant influence over religious life of its citizenry. As such, the study is situated between sociological studies of New Religious Movements and religious conversion. From this research, it seeks to contribute both theoretically and empirically to the sociology of new religions, religious conversion and religious affiliation.

1.2 Research Problematics

Several researchers have analyzed shifts in the local statistics of religious affiliation and changes which occurred in the trends of religious ascription that have existed. From the studies on the growth of Christianity in Singapore, Sng and You (1982) suggested that educational changes, the role of the church and mission schools are instrumental factors in understanding the religious change. On the other hand, Hinton (1985) attributes the state of anomie which confronts the Singaporean while Goh (1999) argues that religious change is due to ability of Christianity to provide transcendent solutions for individuals. While researchers analyzing religion in Singapore have attempted to capture the changes of religious affiliation over the last two decades, a key trend emerging in the sociological study of religion is the rise of new religions movements (NRMs). This development must be noted and it contributes to a robust study on religious revivalism, persistence of religion and religious conversion in Singapore.

The rise of new religious movements and its burgeoning scholarship necessitates a research on Singapore to document the religious change, religious conversion and the persistence of religion. In Singapore, the increasing popularity of humanism and humanist groups and the rise of new religions such as such Soka Gakka, Sukyo Mahikari, Krishna Consciousness, Sathya Sai Baba in Singapore are observed. Wallis (1984) created a typology of new religious movements; world-rejecting, world-affirming or world-accommodating new religions. Movements approximating the world-affirming type claim to possess the means to enable people to unblock the physical, mental and spiritual potential without the need to withdraw from the world and utilizing means which are readily available. Using Tzu Chi

Buddhist Foundation as an example of world-affirming new religious movements in Singapore, this thesis argues that there is a movement towards spiritual humanism in modern society. How does Tzu Chi maintain a community of believers? What is the socio-political climate in which these social relationships and processes occur? Religious conversion, religious revivalism and the growth of new religious movements do not take place in a vacuum and are in fact culturally embedded and context specific.

1.2.1 Religious conversion

Within the social sciences, researchers have engaged in debates over the process of religious conversion without arriving at a unanimous answer. A spectrum of perspectives and definitions is available, ranging from a rapid personality change (Wallace 1956) to a "reorientation of the soul" (Nock 1933, cited in Snow and Machalek 1984). Research on religious conversion reflects either a classic¹ or contemporary² research paradigm. Classic definitions of the process draw heavily from Christian biblical conceptualizations of Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus (Richardson 1985). Religious conversion is characterized as a sudden or gradual process by which the self is radically transformed for the better. Predisposing psychological factors are often examined as precursors to the religious transformation. This perspective is evident in many of the early studies on conversion by Starbuck (1899), James (1961) and Coe (1917). However, I proffer that these abrupt changes observed in an individual can possibly be momentary observations from a psychological perspective. Much work in support of this traditional paradigm has

¹ The classic paradigm is also termed traditional paradigm by some scholars. Both terms can be used interchangeably.

² Similarly, the contemporary paradigm is sometimes referred to as active paradigm.

failed to take into account numerous examples of conversion that have shown an active involvement of the potential convert in the process. In order to ascertain whether these transformations are transitory or enduring, I suggest that cultural and social factors must be studied to determine the degree of change and explain the context which bring about or facilitates the change in identity.

Another way to account for the increased membership in new religious movements, sometimes pejoratively called “cults”, would be the socio-psychological method of thought reform. A popular term associated with this process would be brainwashing. Through the manipulation of psychological and social factors, individual’s attitudes can be changes and their thinking and behaviour radically altered. Brainwashing theories suggest that this process is not experienced as a fever or a pain might be; it is an invisible social adaptation. When one is the subject of the process, he will not be aware of the intent of the influence or the changes taking place within the social environment. Lifton (1989) has recognized eight themes of thought reform³ while Singer (1995) identified six conditions⁴ and Schein (1961) named three stages.⁵ Brainwashing theories have often been associated with cultic conversion as part of the intense influence and change processes in many cults when people take on a new social identity. The successful convert would subscribe to the teachings, ideology and practices of the group and members refer to this new identity as transformed, reborn, enlightened, empowered, re-birthed or cleared. According to this view, cult members use coercive means and deprivation to exercise mind control over new converts. “Brainwashing” ideas served an important role in efforts to

³ (1) Milieu control (2) Loading the language (3) Demand for purity (4) Confession (5) Mystical manipulation (6) Doctrine over person (7) Sacred science (8) Dispensing of existence.

⁴ (1) Keep the person unaware of what is going on and the changes taking place (2) Control the person’s time and, if possible, physical environment (3) Create a sense of powerlessness, covert, fear, and dependency (4) Suppress much of the person’s old behaviour and attitudes (5) Instill new behaviour and attitudes (6) Put forth a closed system of logic; allow no real input or criticism.

⁵ (1) Unfreezing (2) Changing (3) Refreezing.

regulate NRMs for years, and still have impact, given their almost hegemonic status.⁶ However, the brainwashing paradigm is questionable from a scientific point of view (Richardson & Ginsburg, 1998) and should not be admitted as evidence. It fails important required tests for expert evidence, including its lack of falsifiability or testability and there are difficulties in ascertaining an “error rate” when designating individuals as brainwashed or not.

Richardson (1994) also critiques brainwashing theories by arguing that it would not be able to account for long-term changes of behaviour and belief allegedly occurring with NRM participation. The degree of determinism associated with contemporary brainwashing applications usually far exceeds that found in the foundational work of Schein and Lifton. More importantly, brainwashing theories do not take into account that individuals are seekers with their own agency and taking an active interest in changing themselves or deciding to join a group.

In contrast, the contemporary paradigm in conversion stresses a gradual, rational process of active search and self-realization (Richardson, 1985). Contextual and situational factors are often examined as contributors to the course of the gradual process. This perspective appears to be a recent development within the fields of sociology and social psychology and represents a humanistic alternative to the determinism of the classic paradigm.

A model of conversion from the contemporary paradigm can be understood from recent sociological studies on the globalization of Christianity. It is argued that people convert to Christianity because it offers an identity in the larger social political and economic arena (Hefner 1993, Polluck, 1993). According to Hefner, “the most

⁶ While brainwashing ideas became less effective in the U.S courts when used as justifications for actions against NRMs, it is noteworthy that the ideas themselves have spread and are used in custody battles and child sex abuse cases in way completely unrelated to the earlier use in NRM cases like its success in part of the defense when deprogrammers were sued in civil courts for false imprisonment or assault, or when they were charged with kidnapping in a criminal action (see Richardson 1991).

necessary feature of religious conversion, it turns out, is not a deeply systematic reorganization of personal meanings but an adjustment in self-identification through at least the nominal acceptance of religious actions or beliefs deemed more fitting, useful and true” (Hefner, 1993:17). Thus, conversion is not just an acceptance of beliefs but it is the acceptance of a new identity as well where the new reference point or new locus of self-definition is found in these beliefs. In a similar vein, Polluck (1993) supports this definition and reason for conversion in the assertion that conversion to world religions is a particular response to social and cultural change. He suggests that conversion is a crisis in “culturally informed notions of person and identity” (1993:166) and that of a religious or cosmological change. In conversion to Christianity, individuals convert because the religious offers a new source of cultural and social identity.

Lofland and Stark (1965) present an elaborate model of conversion⁷ in examining the process of conversion in their study of the Unification Church. Its primary contribution would be analyzing how people join NRMs, the potential convert’s personal definition of himself as an active seeker of religion which is significant to the overall understanding of NRMs. While some recent empirical studies validate the model (Wilson and Dobbelaere, 1994) others reject some of the accumulating 7 steps to conversion (see Greil and Rudy, 1984). Although the model highlights the importance of socio-psychological conditions in determining a persons’ conversion to a new religious movement, it has had limited success in predicting who

⁷ Lofland and Stark proposed seven necessary steps to facilitate a “true conversion” from a “verbal convert” to a “total or true convert” they must undergo (1) some sort of tension in their lives, (2) which may be solved or answered by religion or religious ideas, (3) leading them to become religious seekers. Following which these individuals must (4) encounter a cult at a certain “turning point” in their lives and (5) form an interactive bond with certain cult members. Subsequently, they would (6) reduce their involvement in other non-cult activities, and (7) interact with other converts. Although only steps (1) through (4) are required to make a member a “deployable agent” of the cult, the overall accumulation of these 7 experiences are necessary to produce a total convert.

will experience conversion, and has not provided a complete explanation of the conversion process (Seggar and Kunz 1972, Kox, Meeus, and Hart 1991). Another problem with this conception of conversion would be the assumption that conversion is a universal experience despite the fact that there can be an observable range of practical to total converts, with some individuals more converted than others. In using a model like Lofland and Stark's, it is difficult to identify the exact degree of conversion, how "partial" or "total" conversion type begins and ends (Snow and Machalek, 1984: 170). When will a new member become a full member or a verbal convert to a total one and it is vague to determine a precise point on a scale of conversion. In this way, there are actually varieties of interpretation of experiences. Certain religious experiences might also have been induced by special techniques, mental control or drugs. Hence, these "altered states of consciousness" might not be accurate representations and are open to individuals' interpretation (Barker, 1989).

There are some models of the conversion process which combine elements of the classic and the contemporary research paradigms (Richardson 1985). For example, conceptual attempts to bridge the classic and contemporary research paradigms include the specifications of conversion "careers" (Richardson 1977) and the identification of conversion "motifs" (Lofland and Skonovd 1981). Lofland and Skonovd's motifs consist of six different types of conversion that differ on five different dimensions. The six types include both classic and contemporary conceptions of conversions and are labeled as intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist and coercive. Sociologists have also developed and tested predictive models (Lofland, 1977; Lofland and Stark 1965; Seggar and Kunz 1972) that characterize conversion as the result of personal predisposing factors and situational determinants.

Indeed, current conceptions of conversion have not adequately specified the process of conversion nor clearly demonstrated the effects of the conversion process on the self. There are some commonly identifiable features to religious conversions, but a lack of a consensual explanation could be attributed to several factors. Previous research has generally failed to distinguish among different types of religious conversion experiences and, instead grouped different converts together within a single sample. Also, it is important to distinguish religious conversion from non-religious ideological change or non-conversion religious change.

Many studies of conversion have not emphasized on the actual experiential process of conversion as a varied phenomenon uniquely experienced by individuals. It is the aim of this study to unravel the symbolic narratives of Tzu Chi members (Chapter 3) and utilize the contemporary paradigm as a basis to account for the gradual, rational process of “conversion” where one is involved as an active seeker searching for self-realization. This will highlight the importance of individual agency in understanding any ideological or religious change in a person. I argue that there is also no single explanation for adherence or conversion to a particular NRM but in fact multiple explanations. From the agency perspective, the variations in conversion narratives suggest that it is impossible to account for conversion as a universal experience or simply by using a single explanation. The reasons for conversion can vary for individuals as one can be motivated by different or several factors. Apart from the agency perspective (Chapter 3), there are also multiple factors arising from the social, cultural and contextual environment. Since there are different types of NRMs, each with their own “self-contained system of assumptions, teachings and recipes for action” Beckford (1985:60), the multiple factors also include structural

reasons (Chapter 4), the organizational composition of the NRM, contextual and situational factors which can influence and facilitate the conversion process.

This study will take adopt a new perspective to explain the process of change in religious affiliations. In this study of religious conversion in Tzu Chi, my findings revealed that individuals do not abandon their current or previous religious affiliations. Conversion can be interpreted as an event that required the adherent's rejection and exit from one's religious system of belief to another (see Lofland and Stark, 1965) or a necessarily severe or "radical reorganization in identity, meaning and life" (Travisano, 1970: 600). I will show in this thesis that the term "conversion" would be an inappropriate label to describe or encapsulate the religious change or switching in Tzu Chi. Many of my informants described their experience of switching and combining practices from various religious organizations. Given the choice to customize religious experiences in an organization which operates on a dual-sphere framework, many Tzu Chi members combine several religious identities and straddle involvement in distinct organizations. I suggest that **religious alternation** is as an alternative to substitute the idea of conversion.

'Alternation' was first introduced by Berger (1969) who described the identity of the individual in modern society as susceptible to change. According to Berger, "an individual may alternate back and forth between logically contradictory meaning systems... the meaning systems he enters provide him with an interpretation of his existence and of his world, including in this interpretation an explanation of the meaning system he had abandoned". Travisano (1970) distinguishes between 'alternation' and 'conversion in terms of religious identity and claims that Berger's use of 'alternation' is too inclusive and it does not differentiate between a complete or partial change of identity. He pointed out that some identity changes do not involve a

complete change and thus, 'alternation' is suited to describe less radical shifts in one's identity. Travisano (1970) defines 'conversion' as a "radical reorganization of identity, meaning, and life" with the "adoption of a pervasive identity which rests on a change from one universe of discourse to another". In his example of a Hebrew becoming a fundamentalist Christian, this illustrates conversion which requires a radical change, complete transformation which removes past networks and worldviews. In contrast, alternation can be understood in how the Hebrew joins the Unitarian Society which does not require a break or separation from the past and the new identity is an addition without a drastic reorganization of the past. Travisano describes the linkage between the old and new identity sequences with new identities added to create a cumulative identity.

As an extension to Travisano's study, my research will utilize the term 'religious alternation' to analyze the changing, and at the same time, multiple religious affiliations as the adherents alternate between different religious systems. Similarly, alternation in Tzu Chi does not require a complete change or the need to sever prior religious affiliations. In alternating between Tzu Chi and other religious organizations, the cumulative identity and high degree of alternation is observed in Tzu Chi members. Thus, Tzu Chi accommodates a multi-religious membership, consisting of Hindus, Christians or Catholics within a Buddhist organization. How do we make sense of religious alternation in Tzu Chi Singapore? It is essential that to examine the landscape of religion and religious change in the society to contextualize the Tzu Chi's growth and the phenomenon of religious alternation.

1.2.2 Religious revivalism and the rise of Buddhism

Secularization impacts religion in contemporary industrial society and scholars often assume this means not only the decline but the fall of all religion (Wallace, 1966; Wilson 1979). Most sociological studies have examined the process of economic development and its influence on religiosity in modern societies. Berger (1967), Luckman (1967) and Wilson (1969) and Martin (1978) have variously argued that the process of secularization is an inevitable outcome of modernization. From the perspective of the modernization theory, it is argued that religious institutions would lose their importance and functions in modern society as a result of modernization. ‘Social differentiation’ occurs by which specialized roles and institutions are developed to handle specific features or functions previously embodied in, or carried out by, one role or institution (Wallis and Bruce, 1992). The pervasive influence and dominance of religious institutions over social life is dwindling as a variety of specialist institutions for social welfare, education, and even social control have sprung up in modern industrial societies. Modernization theory would expect secularization to lead to a gradual decline of religion to an eventual situation where people no longer participate in religious activities, fulfill religious obligations or require religion.

Another view supporting the secularization theory would be the post-materialism thesis⁸ which proposes a shift away from adherence to traditional or formal organized religions towards ‘individual spirituality’. Economic development will improve individuals’ economic security significantly to the extent that they are no longer concerned about material survival (Inglehart 1990:177). However, Science has

⁸ Economic development will lead to a shift from traditional authority to individual freedom in industrialized societies. Religiosity, defined as faith in traditional or formal organized religion (i.e centralized bureaucratic authorities) would be replaced by individual spirituality. (See Inglehart, 1997:78)

limitations in addressing existential and moral issues or explaining the meaning and purpose of life. Since 'traditional' religion would be conflicting with post-material society, the move towards spirituality can fulfill the need for religiosity. In other words, religion would still be functional but modified to fit the social conditions in a highly economically developed society.

A research which contributes to the study on secularization and religiosity would be how secularization can impact religious authority at three levels; lacization, internal secularization and religious dis-involvement (Dobbelaere, 1987). At the level of lacization, it occurs when societal institutions become autonomous from religious sphere, there is a declining ability for religious authority to exert control. Internal secularization refers to the way in which religious institutions are becoming more secular. In this way, organizational resources in the religious domain cannot be effectively controlled by religious authority. Religious dis-involvement would be a decline of religious beliefs and practices among individuals and also a decrease in the amount of control over individuals exerted by religious authority.

In general, these perspectives suggest that religious authority is weakening and its ability to assert influence and control declines. With economic development, religiosity of the society and its individuals will be affected. These probabilistic trends have predicted a variety of changes which is affecting religion in society. Dobbelaere's arguments suggest the changing nature of religious authority and its impact on individual beliefs and religious behaviour, meso-level organizations and societal-level institutions. Nevertheless, the fervor in religious participation and religiosity points to an important global phenomenon of religious revivalism.

Specifically, the revivalism and the persistence of religion is an observable phenomenon in the West. "One of the conspicuous religious paradoxes of our time is

that although western societies have, in greater or lesser degree, undergone a process of secularization, to a point where it is not inappropriate to refer to most of these societies as ‘secular’, none the less, multifarious new religions emerge and appear to flourish – perhaps as never before (Wilson & Barker, 2005: 291).” Most research which are done on Western societies and the patterns of church participation in Christianity reveal the contradiction between secularization and religiosity. Against the arguments of the classical secularization hypothesis which suggests the declining significance of religion in a society, Wilson & Barker suggests that the emergence of new religions reflects a process of religious revivalism and sees it as having no impact on secularization. Also, Bell suggests that secularization produces an era of religious revival and experimentation (see Bell, 1971). How are these studies, done on Western societies, useful in accounting for religious revivalism in Singapore? Can the reasons for religious revivalism in the West account for the phenomenon in Singapore? Several scholars have proposed various explanations for the revival in religion, religiosity and religious participation in Singapore. I suggest that Tzu Chi in Singapore emerged in the context of religious revivalism, situated within the rise of Buddhism and growth of new religions in Singapore.

Researchers have arrived at different conclusions while examining the secularization hypothesis in Singapore. Chen (1977:23, 24) suggested that the rapid modernization and economic advancement of Singapore has led to the introduction of new values, some compatible, others in conflict, with traditional values. Tham (1985: 17) argued that changes like the dominance of the English language in society, the development of an open, capitalist economy have resulted in the adoption of western “traditions” and values at the expense of local languages, cultures and moral/ethical values in the economic and institutional systems. This has resulted in greater

privatization of ritual practices of the various religions and the selective retention of rituals centred on the individual rather than the group.

The rapid pace of industrialization, modernization and westernization is evident in the high economic growth and mass consumption culture of Singapore. Although the process of modernization implies that sectors of the society are increasingly removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols due to the weakening of religious authority and influence, the condition in Singapore society proves otherwise. Clammer suggests religious sentiments in Singapore are experiencing a revival rather than decline (1985:52-54). One of the major religious movements in contemporary Singapore is what has come to be known as the “Charismatic movement”. This form of religious revival is representative of a world-wide phenomenon affecting Christianity internationally since the early 1960s (see Clammer, 1991). This social fact of religious revivalism runs contrary to the theoretical arguments of secularization which denote the process of decline in the social significance of religion as one of the consequences of modernization. Indeed, there has been a shift in the Sociology of religion from the focus on secularization hypothesis and decline of religion to attempts at explaining the revivalism and persistence of religion.

One way to account for religious revivalism in Singapore would be Tong’s concept of religious competition. As an alternative⁹ to understanding religious

⁹ Finke and Stark (1988) argue that religious pluralism found in many societies translates into greater religious adherence. Similarly Breault (1989) suggests that pluralism will lead to greater religious participation. Contrary to the assertions of Finke and Stark (1988), Tong argues that pluralism itself does not lead to higher religiosity or religious participation. Singapore has always been a multi religious society. Religious groups were primarily interested in looking after their own flocks, Islam for the Malays, Hinduism for Indians, Chinese religions for the Chinese and Christianity for the Europeans. There was little contact between the religions and except for a small group of Christian missionaries, converting members from other ethnic groups was not a priority. It was only when one group was perceived to be a threat that religious competition and the rise in religious activism started. Thus, the question from a conceptual angle is not whether pluralism leads to the persistence of religion but rather, what are the conditions which will cause pluralism to lead to a revival. (See Tong, 2007:192)

revivalism in Singapore, Tong (2007) cites the evidence of religious competition in Singapore, a multi-religious society with the coexistence of many religions. In the analysis of his data, it reveals that the 1980s and 1990s is a period of religious competition among the various religion in Singapore, in particular, Christianity, Buddhism and Taoism. Since Christianity embarked on a concerted proselytisation drive in 1960s and 1970s, this led to a dramatic increase in the number of Christians in Singapore. Tong suggests that no religion would be idle in face of out-conversion of its members into other religions and the religions that were most affected are Buddhism and Taoism which had to react to the change and challenges posed by Christianity.

Utilizing the religious competition perspective, the increase religious fervour can be understood in the manner in which religions create outreach programmes to proselytize and attract members. Tong noted how Christianity had gospel rallies or Sunday school classes while Buddhists started to organize Dhamma rallies and Dhamma classes. These are strategies for religions to compete for members. Tong also suggested the possibility that the high degree of religious revivalism in Singapore may stem from the fact that many of those who are Christians and Buddhists were recent converts to the religions. It can be suggested that conversion to another religion means that there is greater adherence to the religious ideology of the religion and at least for the initial period, a higher degree of religious participation.¹⁰ In doing so, this stimulates greater vitality among various religious groups, a heightened religious awareness among the population, increased religious activities or active proselytisation programmes which marks a higher degree of religious revivalism in Singapore society.

¹⁰ Neitz argues that people who are aware that conversion is a choice are more attached to these choices than are those who perceive religious affiliation is inevitable (see Neitz 1988).

Pereira (2005) examined religiosity in modern and industrialized Singapore and his study found that Singaporeans are religious, have a high level of belief in (metaphysical) religious aspects and fulfill their religious obligations and activities. It is suggested that the lack of secularization is due to (1) religion as deeply embedded in Singapore society, (2) the state's promotion of religion and (3) a process of religious rationalization. Since religion or religious affiliation has been intertwined with ethnicity¹¹, this explains the centrality of religion within social life in Singapore. Despite Singapore being a secular state¹², the government has an active role in promoting religiosity. There have been significant shifts in the lifestyle and worldview of Singaporeans. Within the religious sphere, rather than encountering a decline in religiosity, religious switching of Singaporeans meant that individuals began to change from one religion to another (Tong 1996: 205-209). For instance, in the process of rationalization¹³, younger and higher educated Chinese have rejected the religion of their parents, usually Taoism and Shenism, in favour of Protestant Christianity.¹⁴ From the data from World Values Survey (2002) and other sources, this study highlights the significance and influence of religion in Singapore.

¹¹ This idea will be elaborated in the later section on Religion and Singapore state. In Singapore, there is a high level of correlation between religion and ethnicity where majority of the Malays are Muslims, Indians are Hindus and Chinese are Buddhists or Taoists. Religion is also a central marker of ethnic and cultural identities. For instance, Islamic practices, values and doctrines are deeply embedded within the Malay culture (see Djamour, 1959; Li, 1989).

¹² Singapore's official secular status is not because the government is a religious or anti-religious, but that was a pragmatic strategy to manage a multi-religious society (Sinha, 1999:81).

¹³ The common reasons cited for this religious switch were because Taoism or Shenism were considered as illogical and associated with superstitious beliefs. In contrast, Protestant Christianity appeared to be a 'rational' religion. The perception of Christianity as a rational, modern religion and organized structure, juxtaposed with a misunderstanding of the tenets and teachings of Taoism and Shenism meant that the former attracted more religious seekers in search of a rational religion (see Tong, 1996:208). The processes of rationalization and intellectualization of religion will be discussed again in the later section on the rise of Buddhism.

¹⁴ In Tong's study (1996), the converts interviewed stated that Christianity had not only a clear-cut set of texts and publications, but also a clear organized structure, with fixed and regular services, 'Sunday School', Bible study classes, and fellowship programmes. It must be stressed that Tong's study does not claim that Christianity is more 'rational' than any other religion; it only points out that younger, highly educated Chinese articulated that Christianity appears to be a more 'rational' religion for them.

Religiosity, the degree of commitment an individual invests in religion and the importance people place on religious life and their religious beliefs have not dwindled.

Religious revivalism can also be observed by examining religious participation in home-based and public-based rituals. With a high degree of religiosity among Singaporeans, it attests to the importance of religion in their lives. Despite social changes occurring in Singapore society, practices like traditional Chinese rituals, such as the worship of gods and ancestors, as well as proscriptions on birth, marriage and death rituals are observed by the population.¹⁵ In Tong's study on Chinese death rituals in Singapore (Tong, 2004), his survey findings indicated that the majority of respondents carry out home-based rituals such as worship activities, the use of joss sticks and offering food and fruits to ancestors. He argues that "the adherence to Chinese religious practices, despite the rapid modernization of Singapore society, remains very high" (Tong 2004: 154). The persistence of religion is evident in how the Chinese continue to observe customary rites and religious practices.¹⁶ The survey also found that the degree of adherence to Chinese funeral rituals is quite high.¹⁷ High rates of adherence indicate that death rituals continue to hold a very significant place in the lives of Chinese Singaporeans, despite the advent of modernization. In present-day Singapore, the home worship activities represent a vital component in Chinese ritual life.

¹⁵ Similarly, for Hinduism, Babb (1976), Cooper and Kumar (1979) and Sinha (1997) also confirmed that the extent of practice of traditional rituals remains essentially high and did not show signs of decline. (see Pereira, 2005)

¹⁶ The ritual of praying to ancestors with joss sticks is performed by over 90 percent of the respondents. Similarly, 98.9 percent of the respondents celebrate Chinese New Year as well as activities associated with it such as the giving of red packets, having a reunion dinner and visiting relatives. (see Tong, 2004:177)

¹⁷ Rituals such as watching over the dead, wearing of mourning garments and washing and dressing the dead, register very high adherence rates of between 84-94 percent of all Chinese Singaporeans. Other rituals, such as buying of water to clean the deceased, and feeding the dead, register about 78 percent adherence. Morality, performance and property clearly continue to be significant motivational factors.

Even for Singaporeans who are part of the transnational migration process, Kuah noted that religious revivalism is evident in overseas Singaporeans. In her study, she explored the reasons why Singapore Chinese practice ancestral worship and maintain social ties with their ancestral village in Anxi county (Fujian, China). In the practice of ancestral worship by this group of Singaporeans, it attests to the observable fact of religious revivalism (Kuah, 2000).

In this research on Tzu Chi, I found that the level of religious participation of the population in Singapore society is essentially high, considering the high frequency of involvement, activity participation and contributions by members in religious organizations. While it is not the goal of this thesis to design a quantitative methodology to measure the levels of religiosity and participation by calculating and comparing the amount of time or resources invested into a particular religious group, I am suggesting that modernization and technological development in Singapore society has not resulted in the decline of religion. In multi-religious Singapore which has a myriad of religious choices, each religion has different and varied forms of rites or customs and practices. The attempt to measure or compare religious participation within or across groups might be empirically challenging. For instance, some Buddhists or Taoists tend to visit the temple on special occasions only while others pray at their home altar on a daily basis. Their belief systems need not necessarily require a regular membership with a temple. As for Christians, some attend Sunday Church on a weekly basis while others are active participants in other church activities which require higher frequency Church attendance. Given the range of religious options and variations in religious practices, it becomes a complex task to comparatively measure religiosity or religious involvement. Nevertheless, the high

levels of participation of members demonstrate the process of religious revivalism characteristic of Singapore society.

An understanding of the growth and popularity of Tzu Chi must be seen within the framework of the socio-cultural and religious changes occurring in Singapore society. The earlier section has provided a backdrop explaining religious competition, increased levels of religiosity and the continual adherence to Chinese ritual practices which can account for religious revivalism. Since religion and religious change are embedded in the social and cultural life of the society, I suggest that religious revivalism must also analyze another major trend occurring in Singapore society; the rise of Buddhism in Singapore. This will also account for the appeal of Tzu Chi, a Buddhist organization, and its ability to thrive in a multi-religious society.

Buddhism has the largest group of believers and it is the fastest growing religion in the country. From the Singapore Census of Population of 2000, the number of Singaporeans, who identified Buddhism as their religious affiliation, has significantly increased from 27 and 31.2 percent in 1980 and 1990, respectively, to 42.5 percent in 2000 (Singapore, Department of Statistics, 2000). There are also key changes like rationalization¹⁸ and intellectualization¹⁹ of religion as well as the growth

¹⁸ See Footnote 11. In Singapore, rationalism is the underlying foundation of modern education. It emphasized logical reasoning (inductive or deductive) and empirical observation. With an increasing level of education, more and more Singaporeans find it difficult to continue to accept the traditional religions of their parents that are perceived to be “irrational” and “mere superstitions”. Disillusioned, many choose to convert to Christianity or Buddhism which in contrast are perceived to be orderly and systematic religions. It is sociologically interesting that informants refer to rationality or irrationality of religions although all religions are in fact rational, in the sense of internal consistency. The perception in part explains the appeal of Christianity and Buddhism to younger Singaporeans, who have been socialized in a rational educational system. Both Christianity and Buddhism are religions of the book, with established religious institutions such as the church or sangha, and both were once taught in Singapore’s formal educational system as a part of the Religious Knowledge Programme (see Tong, 2007: 89).

¹⁹ See Footnote 11. It refers to a process where individuals shift from an unthinking and passive acceptance of religion to one where there is a tendency to search for a religion that they regard as systematic, logical and relevant. There is a propensity to switch to a religion that they regard as more “rational” which fits their worldview. It is found that, particularly among the better-educated Chinese, there is a tendency to call themselves Buddhists rather than Taoists. Like the Christians, they perceive Taoism to propagate mere superstitions or at most folk beliefs (see Tong, 2007:127).

of Buddhist associations (Chapter 4) which demonstrates the persistence of religion and how religion continues to be relevant and in demand by the population. The keen interest on Buddhist philosophy has also fuelled the demand for institutional bodies to be established for the teaching and learning of Buddhism.

1.2.3 Persistence of religion and the rise of New Religious Movements

In recent years, the gradual shift away from secularization debates has paved way for research on the persistence of religion. Much debate about the growth in new religions revolves around the decline or gradual secularization and desacralization of traditional religions like Christianity (Hexham and Poewe, 1997). One of the significant indicators of religious revivalism would be the emergence and growing popularity of new religious movements. In Singapore, exceptional growth in groups such as the Soka Gakka, Sukyo Mahikari, Sathya Sai Baba, and the Bahai is observed. For example, Soka Gakkai which started in the 1970s with about 5 to 7 members, has expanded to over 40 thousand households. Other new religions which have surfaced in Singapore includes Japanese New religions, Tenrikyo, Rissho-Kosi-Kai and of course, Taiwan's Tzu Chi. The increased levels of religious affiliations and involvement in new religions demonstrate that religious persistence is pervasive in modern society and this social fact counters the once popularized notion of the secularization thesis.

The attempt to explain the expansion and global reach of new religious movements is varied. With evidence of the continual role of religion in the modern world²⁰, Hadden and Schupe (1985) also question the secularization theory. Another

²⁰ Roles of religion in the civil rights movement in American, the rise of Soka Gakkai Buddhism to political power in Japan, the rise of the Moral Majority in the US and the Shiite Muslim, uprising of the Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran (see Haddon and Schupe, 1985).

prominent set of discussions of NRMs would be the association with sectarian movements or cults. Moving away from a typical association of NRMs with cults, Wilson suggests that “the cultic milieu²¹ has not embraced all NRMS, of course. But it has symbolized the new openness of segments of the public towards spiritual experience and even experiment, and the possibilities of religious innovation. The breakdown of local community, the multiplication of the impersonal contexts in which roles work, and indeed, other social roles, are increasingly played out, and the general anonymity of urban society, may all have contributed to this search by some for sources of personal identity and cosmic meaning, whether in the religious supermarket of the cultic milieu, or by conversion to one or another of the more firmly established, usually exclusivistic, movements emerging in the last century and a half” (Wilson 1995 in Wilson & Barker, 2005: 292-295). Although such a view on new religious movements which stems from an agency approach accounts for how an individual, as an active seeker, is mediating social roles within urban communities, it stops at explaining how and why factors like the community, impersonal contexts in modern society creates the demand for spirituality and growth in new religions.

McFarland (1967) postulates that new religions are variously dated products or responses to endemic recurrently intensified social crises. Yinger (1970) suggests that ‘normlessness’ caused by urban migration, war, defeat and occupation predisposed many Japanese to new religious movements, an antidote to anomie. However, there are limitations on anomie theories²² and limited data to support that normlessness as a

²¹ Cultic milieu” – introduced to the literature in 1972 by Colin Campbell (1972), See Wilson 1995.

²² For instance, sociological studies found that anomie is not an effective indicator of religiosity or religious participation. Carr and Hauser (1976) for example found that anomie did not correlate with religious participations. Dwinght dean (1974) using the Dean Alienation scale also confirmed that there was no relationship between anomie and religious participation. Photiadis and Johnson (1963) found no differences in normlessness due to differential religiosity. (see Tong, 2007: 191)

main reason for religious conversion or religiosity in Singapore. Also, a variety of alternative course of action is available for anomic or powerless individuals; committing suicide, joining opposition parties. The linkage between powerlessness and because of that, turning to religion, has to be sociologically demonstrated, rather than assumed (Tong, 2007:191). Thus, it is an inadequate explanation for the popularity of new religious movements in Singapore. Reasons for the appeal of NRMs in one society cannot be used as a universal explanation to explain for its attractiveness in another society. Thus, normlessness might have propelled Japanese to join a particular NRM but it does not mean that the same reason can be applied to account for why other individuals join NRMs.

In understanding the growth of NRMs, it cannot be accounted for without the existence of the dominant religions (Stark, 1987) where the growth of religious movements can be facilitated through existing frameworks or when it retains some cultural elements of the current religious structures. Another essential condition would be the impact of “favourable ecology” and form of tension or competition with dominant religions so as to provide a basis for conversion. In a similar vein, the “favourable ecology” can be understood in how Inglehart and Barker (2000:47) argue that established formal organized religious groups may be on the ‘wrong wavelength’ whereas new theologies- such as environmentalism and ‘New Age’ beliefs – are emerging to fill the niche. In a parallel fashion, issues like environmentalism or new age beliefs constitute examples of the “favourable ecology” for new religions to flourish. In this thesis, I shall explain the “favourable ecology” and “correct wavelength” of Tzu Chi which is available through a dual-sphere framework where Tzu Chi operates on two levels; the religious and social-humanistic which allow it to perform dual-functions and reach out to a wider membership. Many Tzu Chi members

also find that they are able to find avenues for self-fulfillment, to perform altruistic acts and manage their religiosity through **religious customization** which allows them to be a Tzu Chi member and at the same time, combine practices from other religious organizations. Tzu Chi membership does not mean that one has to maintain exclusive membership in a Buddhist organization. Instead, members can combine practices, membership or affiliations in other non-Buddhist religious institutions. Furthermore, Tzu Chi operates in a **dual-sphere framework** and has a range of religious and social-humanistic activities catered for its members. With this framework, options are available for members to select and manage their involvement. These reasons shall be discussed in Chapter 3 and explain how they are appealing factors for the individual (agency). Tzu Chi also has an organizational system which is structured and efficient, has a successful outreach programme and a strong sense of community which attracts and sustains membership. When built upon familiar cultural and religious markers within a context of the rise of Buddhism and new religions in Singapore, Tzu Chi is able to establish itself and accommodate a multi-religious and multi-ethnic membership. These structural factors will be explored in Chapter 4 to elaborate on how Tzu Chi is popular in Singapore.

In an earlier study on Tzu Chi, “Aspect and Implication of a Taiwanese Charity Organisation – Tzu Chi or the Buddhist Compassion Relief Association” by Ho Ming-Jung in 1995, the altruistic behaviour among Tzu Chi members was examined. It can be argued that their actions are partly motivated by the goal of self-improvement. Ho relied mainly on official literature and secondary resources. Her limited primary data was from interviews which did not encompass a wide coverage of questions or issues.

In a similar vein, Ting Jen-chieh took a socio-psychological approach and also studied the altruistic behaviour of the members. Ting’s thesis, *Helping Behaviour in*

Social Contexts: A Case Study of the Tzu Chi Association in Taiwan (1997) claimed that the altruistic behaviour among Tzu Chi members arose from the conventional cultural norm of social behaviour in Taiwan. Thus, cultural collective values are more important than individual values and merit accumulation is an important stimulant for altruistic acts performed by individuals to bring about improvements in the community. While these studies focused on studying how agency can determine or motivate Tzu Chi participation, my research will combine perspectives of agency (Chapter 3) and structure (Chapter 4) to provide a holistic assessment on the appeal and popularity of Tzu Chi in attracting large numbers to join the group.

In religious systems across the world, new religious movements are on the rise. Groups like Tzu Chi Buddhist Foundation Movement have risen to prominence with their emphasis on social service and global humanism. Many individuals have joined NRMs and switched from their previous religious affiliation to a new institution or continually juggle different forms of participation. These varied forms of religious behaviour must be analyzed. The religious scene has altered tremendously and the growth of Tzu Chi must be seen in the context of revivalism in Singapore Buddhism and the rise of new religious movements. The phenomenon of religion is complex and dynamic. Yet, the theology and rituals and organizational features of Tzu Chi are sociologically interesting in that it can provide a religious framework that is amenable to the practitioner. The concept of religious customization and dual-sphere framework (Chapter 3) allow individuals seeking for a religion and comfortable with Buddhist teachings to practice Buddhism through a philosophical route that debunks anything that seems irrational or meaningless. The concept of spirituality distinguishes Engaged Buddhism from mainstream traditional Buddhism and makes Tzu Chi an appealing religious option. Through the rituals, ideology and religious practices,

members are constantly engaged in a process of search for their true self and gaining spirituality. On the extreme end of the continuum, it offers a spiritual and social-humanistic focus which attracts members from all spectrums in society, regardless of religion, race, nationality, educational background or socio-economic status.

In previous research on Tzu Chi, Chen Sheng-Jen (1990) adopted a cultural studies perspective in his thesis entitled *Understanding the Buddhist Tzu Chi Association – A Cultural Approach*. He merely relied on a single informant, his elder sister, and examined two themes; the Movement as an extended family and the Movement as a group for self-cultivation. However, his scope of study focused on the micro-level of the individual identity and group relations of Tzu Chi. With religious revivalism and the rise of NRMs forming the backdrop of religious change in Singapore, I argue that a significant factor to account for Tzu Chi's rapid growth in Singapore, and possibly its global popularity, would be **spiritual humanism** (Chapter 5). I suggest that spiritual humanism, a new form of religious humanism, is a combination of spirituality, to achieve awareness of self and engagement with this-worldly pursuits, and humanism, a focus to promote and practice social-humanistic values like charity, altruism, and volunteerism. In this study on Tzu Chi, a new religion in Singapore, it contributes to the existing literature on new religious movements and new religions in Singapore. By my introduction of the concept of spiritual humanism, it is a conceptual contribution which is important for the understanding of religious changes and can account for the popularity of new religions. Prior research on humanism or religious humanism has revolved around ideas like morality, meaning and purpose in life. In Chapter 5, I will explain how spiritual humanism refers to the way in which new religions are committed to the idea of a common humanity which underscores how individuals are concerned with the

social environment and seek to practice social-humanistic values and actions to achieve social betterment and humanity becomes a viable factor for social mobilization and religious participation.

The rise of NRMs and their development towards more practical means of bridging the sacred-profane divide is achieved through active works of charity rather than doctrinal teachings. At the same time, the important contribution of studies on NRMs would be to refute the secularization hypothesis; “in due course, the sacred shall disappear altogether except, possibly, in the private realm” (Mills, 1959: 32-33). NRMs are fast emerging as significant and established groups that play a central role in the global religious system as much as traditional mainstream religions. A comparative case study (Chapter 5) on two other groups Soka Gakkai and Sathya Sai reiterate how new religious movements represent forms of resistance to entrenched mainstream religions. This current research differs from other studies done on these two groups in its attempt to highlight spiritual humanism, a new conceptual idea, and explain the shifting focus away from religiosity to spirituality and self-actualization replacing ritualistic formalism. These groups share commonality in terms of universal humanism and an emphasis on social, charity and community work. I argue that the global notion of a common “humanity” is the new point of reference for the differentiation, evaluation, and modification of social reality (Dawson, 1998:587). In other words, spiritual humanism can explain why these new religions engage in community, social and humanitarian efforts to bring about social change and betterment.

Wilson suggests that new religious movements have contributed to the global supermarket of religiosity and spirituality that has come to typify most contemporary democracies. In the example of Soka Gakkai and its global vision, in designating its

members as 'global citizens', committed to global goals such as ecology, refugee rehabilitation and the pursuit of world peace, it demonstrates that "the old idea of a distinct 'sacred canopy' of unified religious belief encompassing a whole society is no longer tenable: secularization, religious pluralism, and the incipient emergence of transnational global movements have rendered that concept anachronistic if not otiose" (Wilson 1995 in Wilson & Barker, 2005: 296). This study supports the idea that new religions exemplify the growing emphasis on spirituality. Furthermore, it extends the understanding of spirituality by introducing the concept of spiritual humanism (Chapter 5), illustrating its prevalence in contemporary societies and how it accounts for the growth of Tzu Chi into a global phenomenon. This high degree of participation in new religious humanistic movements and the religious fervor demonstrates that religions remain significant and relevant to the society.

Another research on Tzu Chi would be Charles Jones's thesis, *Buddhism in Taiwan: a Historical Survey* (1996). There was little new information as he explored the life of the founder, the organizational structure, religious and moral vision of the Movement which had been embarked upon in earlier studies. In Yao's study, *The Development and Appeal of the Tzu Chi Movement in Taiwan* (2001), she examines the 'appeal' of Tzu Chi from a sociological perspective and discusses it as a New Religious Movement. She observed that Tzu Chi has received more attention from academics than any other contemporary religious group in Taiwan. She argues that 'appeal' and 'development' are two interlinked concepts for the Tzu Chi Movement which results from the interplay of historical and social factors. Both Jones and Yao's research were broad, in-depth accounts about Tzu Chi and did not address any significant sociological question. A noteworthy piece of contribution would be Huang's *Recapturing Charisma: Emotion and Rationalization in a Globalizing*

Buddhist Movement from Taiwan (2001) which examined how charismatic religious emotion can be combined with rational worldly conduct and argued that Tzu Chi's style of emotional practices is culturally specific and ethnically bounded. However, it is not my intended purpose to examine charisma, charismatic authority and the constellation of issues revolving around religious leader. In my study, I shall combine an agency and structural approach and discuss the notions of **multi-religiosity**, **religious customization**, **dual-sphere framework**, **religious alternation** and **spiritual humanism** which I found in my fieldwork. I argue that these factors account for Tzu Chi's success and popularity in Singapore. Furthermore, this will be a significant contribution to the study of new religions in Singapore and a pioneer study on Tzu Chi in Singapore.

1.2.4 Religion and State

In a multi-ethnic society like Singapore, religion is defined along cultural and socio-political lines. Any research on religion in Singapore will inevitably examine the role of the state in Singapore society. The 2000 Census highlights a complex ethnic and religious composition in the society where 50% of the population is Chinese religionists, 14.8% Christians, 12% Muslims and 5% Hindus. Apart from these major world religions, there are other religions, including Sikhism, Soka Gakkai, Sathya Sai Baba, Bahai, Krishna Consciousness and Tzu Chi co-existing in the same social space. It is of no surprise that the State infiltrates its control over issues pertaining to religion. For instance, compulsory religious education is institutionalized in schools in the 1980s and a Bill in Parliament was passed to preserve religious harmony. Cultural pluralism in the society would mean an active role of the State in

regulating the proselytisation of religious ideas and even eliminate any potential threat from religious institutions which might contradict religious and racial harmony.

When studying religion in Singapore, the concept of race is unavoidable in the discussion. Since there is the potential of conflicts arising from the coexistence of different religious or ethnic groups in close proximity, the State has to carefully manage issues pertaining to religion or ethnicity. In the 1950s and 1960s, there were instances of riots²³ which broke out when religious sensitivities ignited conflicts. Furthermore, the potential threat can be exacerbated by religious competition and the inter-religious conflicts. Thus, the secular state has been taking on an interventionist role in the management of religious affairs by implementing social policies like Religious Harmony Act or Religious Knowledge Programme to ensure religious harmony, moral anchor, cultural ballast for its citizens. With the active implementation of policies, the State is able to assert social control over the population and maintain a secular public sphere which cultivates morally upright citizens and a productive workforce. However, this also led to a revitalization of religion and heightened the religious awareness and differences between religious groups. Hence, religions are constantly under check in the greater scheme of political-cultural environment and continually meet the socio-cultural needs of its adherents.

For the State to implement policies and manage various ethnic and religious groups in Singapore, the essentialization and reification of race and religion (Chua, 1996) is an important process which demonstrates how religious affiliations are closely tied to ethnicity. Under a policy of multiracialism, the Singapore government subsumed its citizens into four 'ideal type' major categories or "cultural world orders";

²³ The intricate relations between religion and race has been noted since the communist threat in the mid-1940s and the Natrah, also known as the Maria Hertogh riots which took place on the birthday of celebrations for the Prophet Mohammed in 1950s. The celebration was since banned in Singapore. (see Chua, 1996; Khua, 1998; Hill, 2003).

Confucian-Chinese, Islamic-Malay, Hindu-Indian, and Christian, Anglo-Saxon (see Tong and Lian, 2002:2). The ethnic angle in religious affiliations can be understood in how almost all Malays are Muslims; almost all adherents of Hinduism are Indians. Simply put, Islam is seen as a Malay religion and Hinduism, an Indian religion. These ideas of ethnicity and religion are reproducers of ethnic-cultural identities and such perceptions have an impact on religious change and the nature of religious conversion in Singapore.

1.3 Methodology & Fieldwork

In social science research, the question of interpreting reality beyond our own subjective perceptions remains a problem. Since concepts, worldviews, narratives may be value-laden, a researcher must constantly be aware of these potential problems, maintain objectivity and be open to new ideas and debates. As a non-Tzu Chi member studying the group, it was pertinent that I had to establish initial connections and maintain contact in the field, over a lengthy period of time and in different places, to acquire a sense of the phenomena. Since I am a non-member, I was initially concerned with whether the members would be doubtful of my participation or any unwillingness on their part to divulge information. I was skeptical about proselytisation programmes or expectations of members to pressure me to join Tzu Chi.

My entry point into Tzu Chi was unique in the sense that I started by a visit to the Tzu Chi book Café in Chinatown. It was a random visit where I chatted with the staff and was recommended a series of Tzu Chi publication. My initial contact was a memorable and cordial experience where I was welcomed and received assistance from the enthusiastic staff. Over a tea session that afternoon, I obtained rich

background information about Tzu Chi since the staff are well-informed about the organization's history and eager to demonstrate their knowledge and were forthcoming in sharing their information and experience in Tzu Chi. Encouraged by such positive response, I probed the possibility of doing a research on the group. With an established network and a clearly-defined organizational structure, I was referred to various contact points to discuss about my proposed research.

The fieldwork for this research took place in February 2006 till May 2008. It started off with another visit to the Chinatown office to help out with preparations for a Chinese New Year Charity Fair. That was a important point in my research when I established contact with local Tzu Chi leaders as well as Taiwanese expatriates who have been Tzu Chi members since its founding in Singapore. This group of informants was instrumental in helping me grasp the early establishment of the group and they had insightful historical accounts of Tzu Chi's growth and development. They were supportive of my research initiative and I was pleasantly surprised since urban legends among local sociologists suggested that the gate keeping mechanism for a non-member to conduct research on a new religious movement was very strong.

The other important group of informants would be the Tzu Chi Collegiate Youth Association in National University of Singapore (NUS). I befriended several undergraduates who invited me to Tzu Chi events. There were able to share experiences how they knew about Tzu Chi and eventually joined their group. The rapport and level of trust was established and I need not worry about the possibility of proselytisation into Tzu Chi as they understood the ethical principles and positionality of a researcher for me to conduct an unbiased, reliable and accurate research. A significant part of my initial fieldwork would be an invitation by a Tzu Chi-NUS student to a leader's home for a Chinese New Year steamboat gathering.

There, I was introduced to some administrative staff at Tzu Chi headquarters. With these contact points, it meant that accessibility to the field was established and these social connections provided me important sources of information.

In the Singapore branch, I was able to participate in a series of events at Tzu Chi. The Great Love Charity Fair at Chinese New Year, Happiness Talk on school campus, English and Mandarin Prayer Session, New Year gathering, Blood Donation Drive are some of the major activities. Also, I volunteered and made observations at Free Clinic Sessions, Elderly Home visits, Silra Home Visit, Recycling meetings and Sign Language Classes. From my continual participation, I was able to immerse into the field and has the chance to gather rich and insightful data.

The highlight of my fieldwork would be the overseas fieldwork during May – June 2007 when I visited the Tzu Chi temple and main office in Kanglo Village, Shichen Hsiang, Hualien (Taiwan). Furthermore, there was a global training camp for 900 Tzu Chi members worldwide. It was a first-hand experience where I finally understood what the Singaporean informants had been telling me about the root-searching trips to Hualien where selected members can participate in a specialized training course to better understand Tzu Chi. I witnessed the impressive Tzu Chi establishments and was hosted by the Public relations staff who were able to supplement data about Tzu Chi Taiwan. It was a privileged experience when I was taken on a tour to visit the Tzu Chi University, Tzu Chi hospital and the main Abode. Despite the restricted access to the training camp activities, my role as a visitor provided me with the opportunity to learn more about Tzu Chi.

Although the staff was extremely busy with the camp activities and had to facilitate groups of members to various venues for classes, talks or meals, they made an effort to ensure good hospitality and assisted me with my queries and requests.

During the breaks, I was able to engage in small-talk and conversations with some of the participants. In my conversation exchange with these participants, I was able to obtain first-hand accounts of their reflections from participating in the global camp. Tzu Chi staff and members were keen to share their experiences in the activities, practices and teachings of Tzu Chi and examine the degree of standardization and centralization between Tzu Chi Taiwan and its overseas branch (Singapore).

A significant highlight of my visit was during a morning discussion at Tzu Chi Café, while I was learning of Tzu Chi's organizational chart, the staff exclaimed excitedly that I was extremely lucky to see Cheng Yen in person. According to them, Master Cheng Yen only makes a morning trip to the Abode once a day and I was fortunate to catch a glimpse of her smile at me and the magnificent sight of how everyone bowed in reverence when their Master arrived at the Hall. Since it was an unplanned part of the itinerary for me, it was a bonus that I witnessed the charismatic influence of the Master over her members and how the members never fail to speak about her as an important figure and associate anything about Tzu Chi with their Master. In order to develop a comparative dimension of Tzu Chi in Taiwan and Singapore and gain a holistic understanding of the group, I was able to examine the religious ideology, practices and activities of Tzu Chi in both countries. It is vital to locate the origins of the movement to better appreciate and understand Tzu Chi in Singapore.

Throughout my fieldwork, I conducted interviews with about a total of 80 leaders, members and volunteers in the Tzu Chi Buddhist Foundation. This research is based on qualitative data where the soundness and demonstrable link between data and theory can be established. Also, credibility in reporting information, transferability, dependability and confirmability of research findings can be shown as

convincingly as other more 'scientific' inquiry (Marshall and Rossman, 1989:144-153). I also observed and participated in ritual activities, practices, meeting sessions and social events. With plenty of publications and a Tzu Chi café which sold literature from the Movement, I had access to print materials which outlined the history of Tzu Chi, its teachings, biography about Cheng Yen. It is essential to collect these primary data and combine it with the members' accounts to develop an in-depth understanding of Tzu Chi. There were a series of informal interviews conducted to collect more data, triangulate existing information and clarify or confirm any missing or contradictory facts.

1.4 Forthcoming chapters

Chapter 2 presents a detailed description of Tzu Chi's historical development in Taiwan and Singapore. A brief analysis of its organizational structure, membership and social networks and an ethnographic description of its activities will be discussed. I will explain the significance of the teachings and activities at Tzu Chi.

Chapter 3 will attempt to account for the reasons for Tzu Chi's popularity in Singapore. I will examine issues of religious identity and **religious alternation** to understand membership in Tzu Chi. By examining the experiential lessons of how a convert becomes a Tzu Chi member, the conversion narratives in Chapter 3 shed light on the importance of altruism, self-fulfillment and **religious customization** which are important factors to facilitate one's membership into Tzu Chi. I will also discuss how Tzu Chi is able to offer a wide range of activities in its **dual-sphere framework** (religious and social-humanistic) which create permutations of Tzu Chi membership and nature of participation.

In Chapter 4, an analysis on the structural factors of Tzu Chi can explain organizational features which eliminate the competition for members in the religious marketplace. Also, studies on religion in Singapore must examine how the group is able to fit into the **multi-religious** and multi-ethnic Singaporean society. In doing so, the discussion on Tzu Chi's growth must be situated amidst the popularity of Buddhism in Singapore, the syncretic nature of Buddhism and the relationship between religion and the State.

Apart from these individual and structural factors, both internal and external, Chapter 5 seeks to examine the nature of **spiritual humanism**. In the discussion on new religions in Singapore, I shall highlight two other case studies on Sathya Sai Baba and Soka Gakkai which underscore the popularity and rise of new religions. I suggest that such a process of transformation where there is a strong demand for spirituality with a persistence of religion can be termed as spiritual humanism. With a strong focus on self-fulfillment and search for spirituality, members in new religions are constantly engaged in actions directed to promote humanitarian concerns and social-humanistic values.

This thesis posits that the Tzu Chi Buddhist Foundation is part of a pattern of innovations and developments of new religions in Singapore and has managed to introduce its structural and organizational patterns to its local environment, such as in the area of rituals, place of operations, multi-ethnic membership, and other socio-cultural practices. Members are attracted to the Tzu Chi movement by its universal appeal and consequently join the movement for these certain needs; however, they also attempt to re-create the movement and its practices to fulfill those socio-cultural and religious needs. Indeed, "the rise of new religious movements called for sustained social analysis. Their emergence put into question accepted ideas of historic

continuity, of the relationship between culture and religion, provoking sometimes certain bewilderment within some segments of society. At the same time, new religious movements' illustrated the profound social changes in ritual practices, economic production, the social organization of work as well as in family structure and relationships, community structures and the significance of life and death. Indeed the effects of those changes went beyond new religious movements to include the rise of a new religiosity within established religions" (Beckford, 1986: vii).

Chapter 2 **Origins, Beliefs, Practices of Tzu Chi Buddhist Foundation**

2.1 An Overview

The Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation is a new religious movement that originated from Taiwan. The movement led by Cheng Yen was officially founded in 1966 and its overseas chapter in Singapore was established in 1987. Tzu Chi members have engaged in social service, provided relief aid, medical assistance for the elderly and poor. A volunteer-based, spiritual as well as welfare organization, Tzu Chi offers a humanistic approach to spirituality and religion. Through a this-worldly orientation and engagement in humanitarian efforts and a fundamental basis of core Buddhist teachings, I will explain in Chapter 3 what I mean by a humanistic approach which comprises of religious and social-humanistic aspects in Tzu Chi. In this chapter, I will trace the origins of Tzu Chi and extensively describe the organizational and membership structure of the group. Next, I will examine its teachings and practices and the variety of activities which promotes the missions of Charity, Medicine, Education and Humanitarian of the organization.

2.2 Founder of Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation

Wang Chin-Yun, now known as Master Cheng Yen, was born May 14, 1937 in a small town in central Taiwan. An ordained nun who is the head of Tzu Chi, Cheng Yen is addressed as “Master” (上人) by all her followers and staff who respect her authority as a religious figure as well as the leader of the organization. She was born in a small town called Chingshui in central Taiwan in 1937. According to Cheng

Yen's biography²⁴, her life experiences inspired her to search for a form of Buddhism that would reflect unconditional love through action and her vision was forged by a series of events that shaped her life. When she was twenty-three years old, her father died of a heart attack. The unexpected death shocked her and she realized the transience of life. In his passing, she felt guilty that she had erred in caring for him and often went to a nearby temple to explore Buddhist teachings (Ching, 2002).

Master Hsiu Tao, the abbess of the temple, guided Cheng Yen into Buddhism. Cheng Yen left home at the age of twenty-six and resolved to devote herself to humanity by becoming a Buddhist nun. Both Master Hsiu Tao and Cheng Yen wandered through Eastern Taiwan in search of a place to carry out spiritual practices and settled down in a small village of Luyeh. That same winter, they went to Hualien and met old Hsu Tsung-Ming, a devout Buddhist who was knowledgeable about Buddhist teachings. Cheng Yen asked Mr. Hsu to be her teacher and shaved her own head to become a novice nun. When Master Hsiu Tao returned to her hometown due to poor health, the Hsus looked after Cheng Yen who received much assistance from them. A small wooden hut behind Pu Ming Temple was built by Mr Hsu for Cheng Yen.

In February 1963, Cheng Yen went to Taipei to register for a 32-day "novitiate" to formally become a Buddhist nun. Since she had shaved her head herself²⁵, she was rejected. Before returning to Hualien, she met the Venerable Master Yin Shun, one of the most respected dharma masters in Taiwan who consented to be her teacher and

²⁴ Cheng Yen's biography was published by Still Thoughts Publication, the publication arm of Tzu Chi. In the course of the research, I gathered information through my interviews during the fieldwork. Many leaders in Tzu Chi are extremely knowledgeable about Tzu Chi history and the life of Cheng Yen. In particular, I found two sources which were extremely useful. The book written by Ching Yu-Ing, *Master of Love and Mercy: Cheng Yen* as well as a video produced by Discovery Channel Taiwan, *Potraits Taiwan: Dharma Master Cheng Yen*. These sources contributed extensively to the accounts and information in this Chapter.

²⁵ Individuals who wanted to become a novice nun must be ordained by a religious specialist.

gave her a dharma name: Cheng Yen. This symbolized that Cheng Yen was formally ordained to become a Buddhist nun. He instructed her to "work for Buddhism and for all living beings," an objective that the Master carries with her even today. In 1963, the Master lectured on the Earth Treasury Sutra at the Tzu Shan Temple. Her lectures were so popular that no vacant seats were available.

According to my informants, they are inspired by the resilience and strength of their Master. Several informants²⁶ related this account of how Cheng Yen and her followers lived in hardship studied together, and did not hold religious services nor give sermons in the hut behind Pu Ming Temple. With barely enough shelter and hardly enough to eat, the Master still held firm to her decision not to accept offerings from others. Their rule was, "A day without working is a day without eating." The community was self-sufficient and did not rely on external help, financial aid or donations. As one of the members recounted what he learnt from the lessons on hard work and determination,

Can you imagine how difficult it was when the Master started Tzu Chi. They did not rely on anyone! Master and her followers knitted sweaters, stitched bags to hold animal feed, sewed baby shoes and planted vegetables. Through hard work, they met the basic necessities of life. After starting Tzu Chi Foundation, they also wove cotton gloves to raise funds for the foundation. They were busy working in the fields during the day and studying at night, but their lives were fulfilling. (Yee Ling, 22, Chinese-Buddhist)

Tzu Chi members are taught to have a frugal and prudent lifestyle. They believe in gaining a meaningful life by working hard so that they can be contented with their

²⁶ Many Tzu Chi members are well-versed with the history of the organization and its development. This can be attributed to the education mission of Tzu Chi in promoting various Tzu Chi materials at the Tzu Chi Café, book fairs, and exhibitions. Since materials about the organization are widely circulated and available for purchase, there was high level of accessibility to information. Furthermore, members also share their knowledge in discussion sessions or welcome sessions for new members. During my fieldwork, I noticed that many Tzu Chi members, especially those who have been with the group for several years, are able to recount the history of Tzu chi since they are familiar with the information. In triangulating their accounts with exhibition materials and literature, these members' accounts are accurate and reliable.

fruits of labour. From the lesson about hardships behind Pu Ming Temple, Tzu Chi members believe in "working willingly and accepting the results happily". As Tzu Chi members, it is important that one contribute to the group and feel rewarded about the participation.

In 1966, two significant incidents sparked Cheng Yen's determination to promote charity and medical missions. Many of my informants recounted these incidents as milestones in the history of Tzu Chi which shaped the practices which are promoted in Tzu Chi:

The Master went to visit a follower at the hospital, she witnessed a penniless, aborigine woman be denied medical attention while bleeding on the floor. She saw the pool of blood on the ground left by the woman who could not afford treatment for a miscarriage and the Master was appalled that the poor of Taiwan could not get medical care. (Mrs Tan, 38, Chinese-Buddhist)

On another occasion, three Catholic nuns visited the Master. They talked about life and their religious beliefs. The nuns acknowledged that Buddhism promoted love for all beings and that its teachings were profound. However, Catholics had built hospitals, schools and churches in remote areas to assist the poor. "What has Buddhism done?" they asked, and the Master could not respond. The Catholic missionary said to her, "You Buddhists are a passive group and ignore the needs of others." Master Cheng Yen was determined to serve all humanity. This conversation strengthened her determination to help the poor and the needy. (Melissa, 19, Chinese-Catholic)

From these interviews, my informants expressed that the Master did not wish that the poor and needy continue to struggle under impoverished conditions. Cheng Yen hoped to alleviate suffering and these were catalysts for the Master to establish the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation. At the same time, Cheng Yen envisioned a world of kindness, compassion, joy and equality which she sought to achieve through the aims and missions of Tzu Chi. Many informants explained that Cheng Yen understands that misery in this world is not solely due to poverty, but also,

to a lack of meaningful purpose in life. Thus, the most meaningful life is one of service to those in need. In order to achieve a fulfilling life, Cheng Yen teaches that Buddhism has to be actively involved in helping people. The Master vows to (1) Purify minds, (2) Harmonize society and (3) Free the world from disasters. As the head of Tzu Chi Foundation and as its Buddhist spiritual leader, Cheng Yen's compassion for human suffering has attracted millions of volunteers to serve around the world.²⁷

Tzu Chi is an organization for people from all walks of life. In the spirit of "There is no one I do not love, trust, or forgive," members claim that they can help make this world one of kindness, compassion, joy, and equality by relieving the material and physical suffering of the needy. As Tzu Chi volunteers, members are taught to constantly engage in this-worldly action to achieve personal and spiritual development. Tzu Chi is able to attract members of different ethnic groups, religion and nationalities on an international scale. I will show in Chapter 4 how the charity and altruistic acts create a community of shared purpose which attracts and sustain Tzu Chi membership.

Tzu Chi members also try to emulate the practices and teachings of Cheng Yen. They assert that improvements in society do not come from society itself but from its members. It is through personal growth that profound changes can be possible on the greater level of society. According to my informants, they emphasized that Cheng Yen sees the individual as the crucial agent for change. "The awakening in a person comes from the nurturing of compassion and members are encouraged to perform charitable deeds to help those in need". They suggest that the promotion of an

²⁷ This is an important idea which many Tzu Chi members discussed. Cheng Yen's compassion and aim to alleviate suffering is a fundamental basis of Tzu Chi missions which have been developed to reach out to the needy. At the same time, Cheng Yen's teachings and philosophy about humanity has attracted many volunteers and accounts for the popularity of Tzu Chi. The notion of compassion and humanity will be explored in the subsequent sections of this thesis.

altruistic spirit will inspire more people to learn how to contribute to society and foster better inter-personal relationships and improvements in the living environment.

As aptly reflected by one of my informants:

During the hospital construction, a philanthropist came to offer the Master a generous contribution that exceeded the amount needed to complete the hospital. Though it seemed like a godsend when funds were limited, she politely turned down the offer. The Master did not wish for the hospital to be only a building that saves lives, but an opportunity for countless people to give. Out of the same principle, the Master also held the conviction that each project, whether it was the establishment of hospitals, colleges, and research center, be completed through the joint efforts of many, rather than by a few generous benefactors. Then, more people will be inspired to do good deeds and help one another. The needy will also benefit. We can spread Great Love and make this world better. (Robert, Chinese-Buddhist, 34)

The example of the hospital-building project was considered by my informants, as one of the most difficult trials for Cheng Yen. Many recounted this story and expressed desire to learn from the Master's determination, unwavering and steadfast attitude. They explained how Master Cheng Yen believes that "Faith in myself, that my intentions were pure. And faith in others, that within the heart of every person lies love that is only waiting to be awakened." In embarking on a mammoth task without any resources, Cheng Yen was able to garner the support of her followers and inspired people to contribute. Several informants cited this incident as a motivating lesson and they feel that Tzu Chi creates a community of people with shared purpose and vision which allow them to cooperate in different activities and succeed at many difficult projects.

Since Master Cheng Yen founded the Tzu Chi Foundation, her beliefs and missions have been carried out around the world. Although Tzu Chi has become an international organization, Cheng Yen believes that there should be continual development and growth. In her words, "Nothing is more valuable than life. The most

important thing is to respect life and help people. The greatest tragedy in life is suffering. If there were no suffering, society would be perfect. When everyone is happy, only then am I happy. When everyone is healthy, only then am I healthy. When human suffering ends, my suffering ends".²⁸ My informants highlighted several avenues in which they could participate to help the poor and needy. In Chapter 3, I will analyse the missions and efforts of Tzu Chi to explain why Tzu Chi organizes such activities which are in line with Cheng's Yen's beliefs.

Cheng Yen was awarded the Eisenhower Medallion for her contributions to world peace. She has been nominated in 1996 for the Nobel Peace Prize for her selfless dedication to bringing to a troubled world a renewed vision of compassion in action. In the July 2000 issue of Business Week, Cheng Yen was named as one of the fifty "Stars of Asia" leaders at the forefront of change.²⁹ Cheng Yen's achievements are revealed through the inspiring stories of her disciples and the acclaimed international work of Tzu Chi Foundation.

In the study of new religions, the role of the charismatic leader is of central importance. Many have argued that the influence from a charismatic leader can initiate conversion (Eggleton, 1999: 266) and encounters with the leader are religious experiences.

There is a magical connection with Master. Some of us keep pictures of her in our wallets. We have problems, we will speak to her in our minds or give prayers. She seems to hear us and respond to our troubles. There was once, I met her during the camp in Taiwan. I was so touched to see her in person. Her soft-spoken demeanor was powerful and inspiring during the lectures. It was very spiritually fulfilling. (Mei Choo, 48, Chinese-Buddhist)

²⁸ Mandarin Communal Cultivation at Jing Si Hall, 24 Feb 2008. The theme for discussion was on suffering and playing an active role to reach out to the needy. This excerpt was from a lecture by Cheng Yen that was played on video.

²⁹ July 2000 issue of Business Week

When you see the Master, you will know it. There is a certain air around her that is very influential. You feel at ease and very calm. She is our leader, she is also our spiritual guide. (Xing Yong, 21, Chinese-Buddhist)

In Tzu Chi, it is undeniable that Cheng Yen exuberates certain aura and possess charisma as an influential leader, without whom, Tzu Chi would not have developed so rapidly and attracted so many members. However, it is not the aim of this thesis to embark on a debate and analysis relating to the constellation of issues about charisma. Aside from the charismatic leader who possesses unique qualities and religious authority, this thesis shall explore the reasons why individuals are attracted to Tzu Chi (Chapter 3) and what are the organizational features and structural conditions (Chapter 4) which makes this organization an appealing option for the population.

2.3 History of Tzu Chi

2.3.1 A Brief History of Tzu Chi in Taiwan

According to the teachings of Cheng Yen, the root of many problems in societies stem from the "lack of love for others". In order "to save the world, we must begin by transforming human hearts". The Tzu Chi Foundation Merit Society 慈济功德会³⁰ has since grown into one of the largest charity organizations originating from Taiwan. Tzu Chi has developed from a handful of female members to several thousand devotees of both gender and approximately one hundred nuns. Under the leadership of Cheng Yen, the movement has successfully established itself as a religious organization with several secular institutes and stable money donors to sustain its activities.

³⁰ 功德 refers to merit-making. This means that Tzu Chi is an organization which promotes charity and volunteerism. Individuals who participate in these activities contribute to gain merit. The concept of merit making will be discussed in Chapter 3.

It has become an international organization with over 5 million supporters and over 30,000 certified members who carry out its missions globally. The foundation provides disaster relief throughout the world, sending supplies to disaster victims and volunteers to help them rebuild their lives. Tzu Chi has built hospitals, colleges, and research centers as well as developed educational, social, and cultural programs for its local communities. Today, there are Tzu Chi branches and associations all over the world, in Japan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, England, Austria, Canada, the United States, Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, Laos, Lesotho, and other countries.

Based on the historical records of Tzu Chi, the organization's development in Taiwan can be understood in three stages; (i) the inception of a grassroots women's group developed into a 'model temple' (1966-78); (ii) the mobilization for its first hospital (1979-86); and (iii) its growth into a large nongovernmental organization (1987 – present).

Phase 1: 1966 -1978

Compassion Relief was founded in 1966 as a grass-roots women's group. At that time, Compassion Relief had one nun, five monastic disciples and thirty lay followers, all of them female.³¹ Their goal then was to raise money to supplement the medical costs for the poor. "The disciples lived on the proceeds of their work making baby shoes and each disciple was required to make one extra pair of shoes a day. It was calculated that since there were six of them and each pair of shoes sold for NT\$4.00, they could make an extra of NT24.00 a day and a total of NT\$8,640 a year which would enable the Movement to pay for one patient's medical deposit" (Ching,

³¹ The distinctive female-only participation is due to the fact that the publicity was promoted among the full-time homemakers and stay-home mothers and Cheng Yen was able to gather the homemakers' support. This idea will be explored again in the discussion on Tzu Chi membership in Singapore.

2002). Tzu Chi's first members were 30 housewives who donated a part of their grocery money to the foundation. Before going to the markets everyday, these housewives each put NT\$0.50 (US\$0.02) into a bamboo "piggy bank." They brought Tzu Chi's spirit to the markets, and the news that "fifty cents can also help people" spread throughout Hualien. On March 24, 1966, the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation was formally established. The primary source of funds was from the housewives' daily donations and their success in promoting the practice of portioning groceries' money for charity purposes attracted more donors. Furthermore, the nuns also made handicrafts which generated another source of funds and support for the monastery.

Tzu Chi's first anniversary was on May 3, 1967. It had 10 members and more than 300 volunteers. In its first year, the foundation collected US\$719, and 15 families received assistance. In 1969, the Pu Ming Temple could no longer accommodate the growing Tzu Chi membership. The Master's mother, helped finance the construction of the "Still Thoughts Abode". To pay back mortgage, the nuns of the Abode engaged in many different kinds of work, most notably making candles and bean powder and they did not rely on any public donations.

The mission gradually extended to include delivery of relief goods to disaster victims, house visits to the poor and monthly distributions of charitable goods at their monastery in rural Hualien, the headquarters of Compassion Relief. The laity provided voluntary help to the poor and the sick by cleaning their homes or taking them to the doctor. Cheng Yen referred to these lay devotees as "Huiyuan" 会员 (Commissioners), as they worked as voluntary missionaries of the Movement. The early history of Tzu Chi shows that Cheng Yen gave both lay devotees and disciples the same opportunities to perform charitable acts. Volunteerism was promoted

strongly and associated with Buddhist teachings of accumulating merit and gaining good karma. Many of the devotees were housewives who are concerned about their family members' well-being, health, career and education. In their participation with Tzu Chi, it is seen as complementary to their female role as a homemaker and a mother. The nurturing and caring personality of females can be extended to help those in need. At the same time, these good acts would translate into a better life for them and their families.

Phase 2: 1979-1986

Overmyer (1976) identified two key characteristics which underscore the long history of popularizing Buddhist movements in China; charismatic leadership and move away from monastic meditations to actions directed at lay people. The latter characteristic is an important feature of Tzu Chi's activities and organizational structure where people can engage in daily actions and align their practices with Buddhist teachings. It is evident in Tzu Chi's this-worldly orientation which aims to promote Buddhism as a way of life. While members are encouraged to follow Buddhist teachings, act as a bodhisattva, such connection with mainstream Buddhism is extended when these "empowered" members broaden their values and roles to the rest of society. Thus, they will be in the cycle of goodness to reach out to the needy. In the subsequent section on teachings and practices of Tzu Chi, I shall elaborate on the religious doctrines and rituals which underscore how Engaged Buddhism has impacted religious believers to re-orientate Buddhism to this-worldly concerns so as to make it immediately relevant to everyday life.

In 1979, growth of Tzu Chi was heralded by the plans to build a hospital in Hualien. Cheng Yen regarded sickness as the primary cause of misery and poverty.

When an individual is suffering from poor health, it will require huge finances for medical treatments. At the same time, being sick represents a period of pain and agony for the patient and his family members. Although the patient is suffering from the medical condition, his health problems also cause emotional stress and grief to his family. Furthermore, there was a lack of medical facilities fuelled a demand for a general hospital in Hualien. The devotees of Tzu Chi were enthusiastic in the hospital plans and helped to spread the mission of Tzu Chi and obtain donations from the public. With the completion of a new rail line which facilitated travel around Taiwan, it was a significant step for recruitment of members and collection of donations from Taipei, the capital of Taiwan. The plans were supported by different spectrums of the Taiwanese society³² because they identified with the need for a hospital and recognized Tzu Chi's efforts as beneficial for the common good of the population. With recognition and support from the public which sanctioned the Tzu Chi campaign, mobilization efforts were successful.

Phase 3: 1986 – Present

The period of growth is marked by rapid expansion and institutionalization. Tzu Chi completed several construction projects, attracted new members, increased its fundraising efforts and even expanded beyond the Taiwanese border. Members introduced new converts through activities and others expressed interest in joining the group after learning about its activities. Membership growth was significant in

³² Since medical facilities were inadequate and Tzu Chi was able to supplement the social welfare provision, Cheng Yen received support and was respected by the community. Eminent Buddhist clergy, prominent intellectuals, and high-ranking government officials visited the Master Cheng Yen and Dr Lee Deng-hui, who later became the President of Taiwan, made a cash donation to the campaign, although he was a pious Presbyterian himself. Also, The National Taiwanese University Medical School, the most prestigious school in Taiwan, provided support by supplying trained staff and equipment for the hospital. The Director eventually became the Head of Tzu Chi's Hospital after his retirement. This guaranteed the medical standards of Tzu Chi Hospital and reflects the influence and undisputed achievements of Cheng Yen. (see Yao, 2001)

expanding the mission of Tzu Chi from charity to include three new areas; education, medicine and humanity.

In 1986, the completion of the hospital paved way for further expansion plans. The popularity of Tzu Chi is evident; Tzu Chi hospital became the biggest hospital, running two 900-beds hospital, in the east of Taiwan. The Nursing College was completed in 1989 and the Medical College recruited students in 1994 with plans to develop it into a University. With television and radio broadcasting and print media based in the Taipei branch, publications (Tzu Chi magazines), audio materials (videos and cassettes) containing Master Cheng Yen's teachings and Buddhist literature are available.

The mobilization of its numerous disciplined volunteers attests to Compassion Relief's stature.³³ At present in Taiwan, Tzu Chi runs a hospital, an elementary school, a high school, and a four-year university, as well as a standard medical school, a girls' technological college and a TV station. Tzu Chi's successful provision of social welfare and institutional services surpasses the Taiwanese government efforts.

2.3.2 A Brief History of Tzu Chi in Singapore

Tzu Chi started to spread its mission in Singapore in 1987. It began with Sister Liu Jing Lian, a Taiwanese expatriate in Singapore, who visited the poor and needy in her neighbourhood. She managed to gather a group of volunteers within her social circle and they participated in charity and voluntary work. On 15 August 1991, there were 40 volunteers from Singapore who made a 'homecoming' trip to Hualien in search of

³³ They have raised huge amounts of money, erected enormous buildings, delivered monthly care and welfare checks to 4,000 needy families, sorted garbage for recycling, saved over 3.5 million trees, and rescued disaster victims. In relief help for victims of the 21 September 1999 earthquake, it outdid even the government bureaucracy. (see Huang, 2003).

the roots of Tzu Chi. This was the first time a ‘root-searching’ 回台寻根 (Hui Tai Xun Gen) visit from Singapore was organized.

I was part of the group when we went back to Taiwan for the first time. You know how Chinese should know of our history, our past and heritage. It is a similar practice. You connect with your roots so you will never forget your origins. Only when you can appreciate your history, then you can mould a better future and improve. It is important to maintain connections so you never forget your roots. (Mr Yap, 58, Chinese-Buddhist)

According to the informants, such pilgrimage is significant for the members to understand the origins, history and work of Tzu Chi in Taiwan and this subsequently laid a foundation for the continual relationship between the Singapore branch and the Hualien headquarters. As a Tzu Chi member, one is strongly encouraged to go on the pilgrimage to comprehend the historical links and importance of the headquarters. Also, it is symbolic of one’s membership status as a respected and well-learned Tzu Chi member as opportunities to represent one’s country to return on pilgrimage is reserved for leaders and committed members who have contributed significantly to the group. To be among the privileged few to go on the ‘root-searching’ trip and meet the Master, members have to contribute time and effort and prove their commitment and capabilities so that they can take on leadership roles.

In September 1993, Tzu Chi was officially registered as Buddhist Tzu Chi Merits Society (Singapore branch). It aims to develop Tzu Chi missions of performing voluntary work and educating the population. Different groups of Tzu Chi members, such as the leaders and youths have also returned to Hualien for their ‘homecoming’ visits and participation in major events like the 40th Tzu Chi Anniversary in 2006. In July 1996, when Tzu Chi Taiwan entered its fourth decade of establishment, it set out to develop its humanitarian mission. In line with this goal, the Singapore Tzu Chi

Cultural Centre was set up in Balmoral Road with aims to spread Tzu Chi culture and Cheng Yen's humanitarian ideology.³⁴

The Singapore branch was officially renamed Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation in August 1998, and the branch office was relocated to Trengganu Street in Chinatown. The new office has become the headquarters for local Tzu Chi. In early 1999, Cheng Yen sent one of her disciple, Sister Zhang Hong Lin from Taiwan to help in the development of Singapore branch. Tzu Chi Cultural Centre 慈济志业文化中心 was then renamed as Still Thoughts Cultural Services (Singapore) 静思文化志业中心 (新加坡). In 2004, Jingsi Books & Café 静思书轩 was set up adjacent to the Chinatown office as a retail outlet to continue promoting the various publications of Tzu Chi.

In 2003, Mr David Liu, the CEO of Tzu Chi Malacca branch was appointed by Master Cheng Yen to hold a concurrent post in Singapore branch. Following Buddha's spirit of "Great Mercy even to Strangers, Great Compassion for All", and the guiding principle of "Respecting life", Tzu Chi members in Singapore strived to carry out the "Four Missions" and "Eight Footsteps" (elaborated later in the section on Social and welfare system) of Tzu Chi in the local community. Besides giving financial assistance and spiritual care to the needy, the branch also extended its concern to HIV patients and their families starting 1999. The Tzu Chi Free Clinic 慈济义诊中心 was then set up in August 2004 to serve the senior citizens and Tzu Chi's aid recipients in Singapore.

Since early 2000, the Singapore Branch has extended its Medical mission by organizing free clinic services twice a year for the sick and poor in neighboring

³⁴ The social-humanistic teachings and activities in Tzu Chi will be explained in Chapter 3.

Indonesian islands such as Batam, Bintan and Karimun etc. According to my informant, more than 20,000 locals have benefited from the service. The free clinic has also inspired many local Chinese to join as Tzu Chi volunteers, which led to the establishment of a liaison office in Batam in 2005.

The Singapore branch office was officially relocated to its new premise at Pasir Ris on 30th October 2005. The Tzu Chi Continuing Education Centre 社会教育推广中心 was launched two months after the opening ceremony.

The rapid development and expansion of the branch in Singapore attracted a great number of new volunteers. Many people knew about the new location and were curious about Tzu Chi. Since the old premises at Chinatown could no longer provide sufficient space to accommodate the bigger crowd, it was great that we have a bigger and new space and also more members. (Mdm Toh, 35, Chinese-Catholic)

According to my informants, it was a significant phase in Tzu Chi's history when a piece of land in Pasir Ris was selected to be the new location for the Jing Si Hall 静思堂. It signified an official space designated for Tzu Chi and this meant that there was proper infrastructure established and the organization could focus on promoting its efforts and recruiting new members. The design of the three-storey Jing Si Hall including its macadam walls and porch shaped like the Chinese character 人 – “ren”, which means “human being”, reflects Tzu Chi's teachings and practices on humanity.

As you enter the Hall, one would be greeted by a huge picture of the Abode of Still Thoughts which paints a picture of Tzu Chi Headquarters in Taiwan. This sight warms the hearts of Tzu Chi people as it represents a return to their spiritual home and the connection with the Abode in Taiwan. (Mdm Jana, Indian-Hindu, 46)

One of the ways to establish a connection with the Abode in Taiwan would be through ‘root-searching’ 回台寻根 trips which represents homecoming. In this way, there is an affiliation between Tzu Chi members overseas and with the origins in Tzu

Chi Hualien as well as a bond which symbolizes their association with Cheng Yen, her teachings and Tzu Chi's emphasis on humanitarian concerns. The "return to the spiritual home" will also remind them of the unity and common vision which Tzu Chi members share regardless of their geographical location. This means that members will work together towards achieving the goals and missions, not just to make their society a better one, but to bring about improvements around the world. Another form of representation to emphasize the association with the Taiwan headquarters would be the centrality and standardization of Taiwan Tzu Chi and its overseas branches. For instance, Tzu Chi symbols, teachings, uniform, organizational structure is homogeneous. Even the architecture of Jing Si Hall 静思堂 in Singapore is a replica of the Abode 静思精舍 in Hualien and Tzu Chi uniform is also standardized globally. The Singapore branch is an extension of Tzu Chi's work which is modeled and structured after the Hualien headquarters and such uniformity and standardization marks a high degree of organization in Tzu Chi to symbolize the unity of Tzu Chi members worldwide. There is a constant emphasis on the centrality of its headquarters and pilgrimages to visit the headquarters are encouraged.

At Jing Si Hall 静思堂³⁵, Tzu Chi offers a range of programmes and activities for its members and volunteers. Non-members are also welcomed to join. Tzu Chi aims to cultivate good moral character and promote social-humanistic values by encouraging members' participation in these events. In doing so, members are taught

³⁵ Jing Si Hall has a full range of amenities. Besides a cultural exhibition hall, Jing Si Book Hut, Continuing Education Centre, and multi-purpose classrooms, there is also an auditorium on Level 3 with a seating capacity of 500. In this hall, the two-storey high picture - "Buddha Purifying the World" - forms a magnificent backdrop for the stage and is a sublime sight to behold. Since the opening of Jing Si Hall, a number of camps and training programs for its volunteers have been held there. Classes and fun-filled activities for children, teenagers, and tertiary students are also organized.

to conduct themselves well and develop a particular Tzu Chi ethos which focuses on building an excellent character and inter-personal relationships with others. In Chapter 4, I shall explain this form of Tzu Chi ethos which its members possess. Other social and community activities are also promoted through the Continuing Education Centre. It facilitates the spreading of Tzu Chi culture and humanities through classes as Flower Arrangement, Chinese Calligraphy, Tea Arts and Sign Language for the general public. At the same time, activities such as inspirational talks, beach cleaning exercises are organized. Various recycling points are also set up in different parts of Singapore. The significance of these activities is to encourage community participation and to enhance the cohesiveness within the local neighbourhood. A detailed discussion on social-humanistic activities will be presented in Chapter 3.

Over the years, Tzu Chi Foundation has gathered many members who to render their services to the needy. In their blue and white uniforms, the Tzu Chi volunteers reach out to the community with the goal of bringing love and hope to the people in need. Following Cheng Yen's teachings, these altruistic volunteers share the same vision of "purifying minds, harmonious society and a world free of disaster and suffering"³⁶ and engage in volunteerism and community engagement to reach out to the needy.

2.4 Organizational and membership structure of Tzu Chi

The umbrella organization (Tzu Chi Merit Association) as it currently exists is headed by its founder, Venerable Cheng Yen, who is also the chairman of the board. There are two main divisions, the Tzu Chi Foundation and the volunteer organization.

³⁶ Cheng Yen took these three vows as the Head of Tzu Chi and its Buddhist spiritual leader. She teaches that one can achieve a meaningful purpose in life by helping those in need.

Tzu Chi is registered as a non-profit organization in Taiwan and it has a bureaucratic structure of a board of trustees and departments for various administrative functions. Like Taiwan, Singapore also has strategic committees responsible for the planning and development of Tzu Chi's activities in its four main missions; Charity, Medicine, Education and Humanity.

Tzu Chi volunteers living abroad began setting up overseas branches³⁷ in 1985 and it is now an international organization. In Singapore, local Tzu Chi members deliver aid to needy households, make home visits, organize recycling drives and engage in environmental activities. By and large, the local groups have freedom to pursue their own ends within the guidelines set by the broader organization. I shall extrapolate on the organizational structure and functions in Chapter 4 in my discussion on Tzu Chi's organizational features and how it contributes to the success and growth of the group in Singapore.

During the period of Tzu Chi's rapid growth and expansion, Cheng Yen also developed the Movement's goals of salvation; the new task was to educate the rich 教輔 (jiaofu). Cheng Yen was aware of the social problems and eroding traditional values and morality as a result of one's pursuit for material interests. According to my informants, there are several pressing issues which are seen as challenges in a modern society.³⁸ Following the teachings of Cheng Yen, Tzu Chi educates the rich by demonstrating that giving and serving the community are more meaningful activities

³⁷ A branch is formed when two conditions are met; sufficient members and a permanent place for the sole use of the Movement. The local offices are organized by county and city, with district leaders appointed from the central organization based mainly on seniority. Most local level small groups organize activities in the community and many of its activities are centered at performing the charitable work of the Foundation.

³⁸ For instance, Tzu Chi aims to educate its members on social values and to cultivate a good social community. Some of the social issues which need to be addressed include the need to strengthen family units, ageing population and medical care for elderly, promotion of civic-mindedness and environmental concerns are problems confronting individuals in the contemporary society.

than pursuing wealth, power and prestige. In hopes of helping the rich to grow spiritually and channel their efforts to help the poor, a new membership category was introduced: that of the Honorary Patrons 荣誉官事 (rong yu guan shi).³⁹ Following the inclusion of the rich, Tzu Chi began to recruit from wider range of people. The men's association, Faith Corps⁴⁰ 慈岑队 (cicen duei) was founded in May 1990. With the organization's expansion, more help was needed to organize activities, decorate buildings and control traffic. Cheng Yen then prompted her female devotees to ask their husbands to help and the men recognized that it was necessary to have a permanent male organization in Tzu Chi. Not only would this help to expand the organization's membership, it was seen as an important channel to strengthen familial ties with common activities to promote family bonding and create a cohesive nuclear unit.

The core membership of Tzu Chi would comprise of the females who pledge donations, participate in the activities fervently and are enthusiastic in attracting more new members. These women are often known as the 慈济妈妈 "Tzu Chi Mamas", donned in their uniform, a dark blue conservative 旗袍 (qipao - the traditional Chinese dress) with a pin which is in the shape of a boat. The boat is the 法船 (fachuan - ship of the Buddhist dharma), representing the universal ideal of saving all souls by metaphorically ferrying them to the shore of nirvana. This pin is symbolic of the Buddhist ideology propagated in Tzu Chi and the central goal of Tzu Chi; to reach

³⁹ This membership is given to those whose donations to the Movement reach one million NT dollars about (S\$52,000). In 1987, as the number of the members increased, the Honorary Patrons formed its own association within Tzu Chi.

⁴⁰ Until then, although there were few men in Tzu Chi, it was never intended to create a separate group for them. The Faith Corps came as a result of the Third Anniversary of Tzu Chi Hospital, for which the Movement held a large scale celebration. In a patriarchal society, men play the role of breadwinner in the public sphere of work and focus on working for economic resources to support the family unit. On the other hand, women are seen as domestic homemakers or supplementary wage-earners. Thus, many females are able to contribute to Tzu Chi and invest their time to participate in the organization's activities.

out to those in need and provide assistance to them. There is also another set of uniform for these ladies; they wear the 八正道 (Ba Zheng Dao - the Eightfold Path of Buddhism) when visiting families and doing Tzu Chi volunteer work.

In the analysis of Tzu Chi, an interesting puzzle surfaces; it is known as a Buddhist organization yet one might confuse it with a charity or community organization which has multi-religious and multi-ethnic members participating in the humanitarian efforts. Is Tzu Chi a religion or a social group? In Chapter 3, I shall discuss the forms of religiosity and participation of Tzu Chi members to understand how religious membership and identity is managed in an organization, classically termed as a Buddhist group, which has non-Buddhists members. Before I do so, I shall proceed to discuss the teachings and practices of Tzu Chi to understand the belief and value systems of Tzu Chi members. I will also be discussing the social and welfare systems of Tzu Chi in promoting different activities to achieve the four missions.

2.5 Teachings and practices of Tzu Chi

The Tzu Chi logo (**Plate 1**) is an important tool which inspires its members. The symbols in the logo represent key ideology in Tzu Chi; how the world can be made a better place when the seeds of goodness are planted. The Ship represents Tzu Chi steering a ship of compassion to save all beings from suffering and the eight petals represent the Noble Eight Fold Path in Buddhism that Tzu Chi members use as their guide. The Noble Eight Fold Path are; (1) Right View, (2) Right Thought, (3) Right Speech, (4) Right Behaviour, (5) Right Livelihood, (6) Right Effort, (7) Right Mindfulness and (8) Right Concentration.

Like how a flower grows from a seedling and eventually blooms and bear fruit, Tzu Chi hopes to plant these good seeds and bring about the betterment of society. With good actions and pure thoughts, Tzu Chi

members hope to spread these teachings. (Wan Yi, 27, Chinese-Buddhist)

Tzu Chi members feel attached to the logo and believe that Tzu Chi aims to help the needy and eliminate suffering so that more people will be able to lead happier lives. At the same time, those who are actively engaged in altruistic and charity work will receive blessings in return. Many of my informants emphasized that Tzu Chi promotes a this-worldly orientation and encourages its members to appreciate their blessings to be born in human form and should contribute by doing good deeds with right faith and mindset.

The Tzu Chi philosophy on giving aid explains the cycle of goodness when people help to care for one another and a basis of love which Tzu Chi is built upon. (Fadhli, 36, Malay-Muslim)

This can be understood in line with the Still Thoughts Teachings of Master Cheng Yen, “Love is all-powerful; it can soothe and calm a fretful and disquieted heart, as well as heal the wounds inflicted by calamities”.⁴¹ Thus, the hope of humanity lies in mutual help during crisis and uncertainty. Tzu Chi members believe that the notion of love is prevalent in the teachings, practices of Tzu Chi and it is a universal symbol which binds the group together. Regardless of ethnicity, language or religion, Tzu Chi has members from different backgrounds participating together for an altruistic and charitable cause. In several interviews, Tzu Chi members provide the analogy that volunteers are like a beacon of light where they hope to spread the love and inspire others with their generous spirit and unconditional care.

Love is the sole driving force in their mission; they are givers of love, food, care, shelter, and clothing, anything that will alleviate suffering. But in helping others, we also plant seeds of love. We expect nothing in return, other than for the same unconditional love to be extended to others. When those being helped can begin helping others, the cycle of goodness would have come full circle (Bhavani, 24, Indian-Hindu).

⁴¹ Still Thoughts Aphorisms by Master Cheng Yen, Taiwan: Still Thoughts Publications

Tzu Chi members aim to follow Cheng Yen's teachings to build a world of peace by purifying people's minds and activating the love and compassion within their hearts to end disaster and suffering. Thus, an identifiable characteristic of Tzu Chi activities would be a this-worldly orientation to effect social change, improve the social conditions and alleviate social problems. Such practices are also allow Tzu Chi to promote Buddhism and it is akin to a popular trend observed in China; the emergence of new Buddhist movements often attempted to take a departure from the traditional association of Buddhism with the monastery and sophisticated philosophy. From the Pure Land idea that people perfect themselves by repeating the name of Amitabha Buddha, to the millennial visions of the White Lotus sectarians, Buddhist teachings have changed over time to focus on social and community issues.

There are also basic precepts, known as the Tzu Chi Ten Commandments which Tzu Chi members have to observe. These rules forbid (1) killing of any sentient being; (2) stealing; (3) wanton sex conduct; (4) false speech; (5) alcohol consumption; (6) smoking or chewing of betel nut; (7) gambling, shares speculation, lottery; (8) disobedience to parents; (9) breaking of traffic rules; (10) attending or participating in political demonstrations or anti-governmental activities. The Movement literature also promotes different activities to encourage participation from its members, endorses the ideology of having good habits and an ascetic lifestyle. An informant shares her personal experience while the other relates the change she witnessed in her own family member;

I'm a banker and its all about branded bags and shoes at work, high tea on weekends, which latest jewellery or fashion shows to attend. But in Tzu Chi, you somehow learn the deeper meaning in life. Instead of indulging in these luxuries as an expression of wealth or status, everyone has a unique possession which can be uncovered. The everlasting beauty of love and kindness, of giving to the society and making the effort to care is like a 'blind-spot' many people neglect. While doing work at Tzu Chi, I learnt that image consciousness is

superficial. There are doctors, millionaires, lawyers, hawkers or technicians here. But we are all equal, united by our vision to do our best for the poor and sick. To say the truth, there are times I dread the office attire and look forward to my weekend outings in my neat and comfortable Tzu Chi uniform tee that I really feel proud wearing. (Gina, 32, Chinese-Christian)

My husband used to buy lottery every week and he was so carried away with hopes of striking a windfall. He also drives quite recklessly and will not hesitate to scold other drivers on the road. That was about 4 years ago, but becoming a Tzu Chi member then, he slowly changed. I think he probably is influenced by other men in the Faith Corps probably and hope to abide closely to the Ten Commandments. (Mrs Tan, 38, Chinese-Buddhist)

In my fieldwork, many Tzu Chi members exhibit a strong adherence to the basic precepts - Tzu Chi Ten Commandments. According to them, these are a set of guiding principles which are crucial elements to direct and lead one's life. At the same time, it also serves as a reminder where "The Tzu Chi members, for example, are instructed and exhorted to rid themselves of the three human evils: greed, anger and ignorance, and to cultivate the virtues of caring, unselfishness, understanding and openness" (Yao, 2001:128). In doing so, it will cultivate good moral character and a virtuous personality for the individual. This idea shall be examined again in Chapter 4 when I elucidate the concept of a Tzu Chi Ethos.

Although Tzu Chi missions do not explicitly place any emphasis on religion, its fundamental teachings are based upon Buddhism. Tzu Chi has a regular schedule of religious ceremonies where certain religious practices and rituals are observed. The two major Buddhist ceremonies are held monthly; there are two Mandarin and one English Prayer session. For the first session of the Mandarin service, members gather at Jing Si Hall to attend the "communal cultivation" (共修- Gong Xiu), on the first Saturday of the month. These formal ceremonies and rituals are significant activities in any religious institution; a Muslim mosque has Friday afternoon prayers, a Catholic

church organizes Family Mass or the Christian Church has worship and prayer services on Sundays. They will watch the talks (上人开示 - Shang ren kai shi) by Master Cheng Yen and will discuss a theme of the month. The members will watch and listen to the teachings of Buddha which are taught by Master Cheng Yen. There will be a screening of the recent efforts of Tzu Chi in humanitarian and charity work worldwide. Following Buddha's spirit of "Great Mercy even to Strangers, Great Compassion for All", and the guiding principle of "Respecting life", Tzu Chi members are taught to carry out the "Four Missions" and "Eight Footsteps"ⁱ in their community. The Master relates to the "Fahua Jing" 法华经 (Lotus Sutra) to highlight the bodhisattva's role in helping others in achieving enlightenment. The discussion on other Buddhist sutras is also incorporated to relate to the real life experiences of members worldwide. The members can also share testimonials about their lives or reflections about activities in Tzu Chi.

During the second Mandarin session, it is a religious ritual (礼拜法华经序绕佛绕法共修 – Libai Fahua Jing XuRao, FoRao Fa Gong Xiu) where members need to kneel and pray as they learn the Lotus Sutra. They will also sing some Tzu Chi songs to show their appreciation and give thanks for the blessings they have received. During the "communal cultivation" (共修- Gong Xiu) sessions, Tzu Chi members often relate their encounter of "feeling touched" (感动 – being moved) and how their Master's teachings and effort of Tzu Chi people has been beneficial to population across the world. After watching the clips, the members learn how to be thankful (感恩 – give thanks) and appreciate their lives.

Interestingly, some informants revealed that the former session would be more interesting when you witness Tzu Chi's activities on the video clips. They added that

the former session is definitely less physically demanding compared to the latter session where you have to constantly kneel and pray like a worship service. This could possibly reiterate the idea that there is an emphasis on concrete action rather than Buddhist philosophy, ritual, and text in the worldview of Tzu Chi members. For individuals who are seeking learning opportunities to understand the Buddhist doctrines, there are gatherings for the sharing and learning of religious texts or prayer sessions. For the cell groups, leaders can organize religious meetings where members chant a sutra together or gather in study groups to discuss how Cheng Yen's writings (especially Still Thoughts) relate to the problems of daily life. The Still Thoughts is an important publication that teaches Buddhist teachings by relating them to one's daily actions. During meetings, members cultivate religious wisdom by sharing their knowledge and experiences in line with the Still Thoughts Publication 静思语 of Master Cheng Yen which interprets Buddha's teachings relevant to the contemporary society. A popular teaching from the Still Thoughts Teachings of Master Cheng Yen, "Love is all-powerful; it can soothe and calm a fretful and disquieted heart, as well as heal the wounds inflicted by calamities". The hope of humanity lies in mutual help during crisis and uncertainty and supports the missions and charitable efforts undertaken by Tzu Chi.

2.6 Social and Welfare System of Tzu Chi in Singapore

Tzu Chi's four missions of Charity, Medicine, Education and Humanity represent a network of universal love with the spirit of sincerity, integrity, trust and honesty. The aim of Tzu Chi members is to bring forth the pure world Tzu Chi envisions; a world without suffering obtained through love, compassion, joy and selfless giving. Tzu Chi has expanded into eight fields of compassion; charity,

medicine, education, culture, international relief, bone marrow donation, environmental protection and community volunteerism. This section shall discuss the various initiatives which form part of the “4 missions and 8 footsteps” of Tzu Chi and have been introduced to the local context and benefiting the community.

2.6.1 Charity Mission

In Singapore, charity work remains the main mission of Tzu Chi and includes relief charity and institutional care. Volunteers and Commissioners of Tzu Chi Singapore branch have reached out to numerous disadvantaged families and individuals. Within six years from 1999 to 2005, 535 families have benefited from the assistance provided by Tzu Chi in the forms of moral support, medical assistance, living subsidies, as well as emergency aid. Home visit volunteers are the key participants in charity work. Though not professionally trained, these volunteers try their best in supporting the needy, sick or lone elderly. By conducting regular home visits, volunteers can bring care and concern to the beneficiaries and also make proper assessment of the situations of the beneficiaries to ensure appropriate help is rendered. Besides improving their physical and social well beings, the visits also help the beneficiaries to regain self-confidence and hence be more self-dependent. The volunteers pay regular visits to several welfare organizations and homes to offer help in cleaning the premises and putting up performances to entertain and interact with residents. Tzu Chi Singapore branch currently has scheduled visits to eight institutions which include Sun Love Home, Geylang East Home for the Aged, Kwong Wai Shiu Hospital, HCA Hospice Care, SILRA Home, Children’s Cancer Foundation at NUH, Institute of Mental Health and the Cerebral Palsy Centre at the Spastic Children’s Association School.

Another major charity event includes the Relief Distribution Day started in 1994. Tzu Chi's long-term beneficiaries receive financial assistance, daily necessities and medical subsidy as well as haircut service in this monthly event.⁴² On November 2003, Tzu Chi Singapore branch started an "Elderly Care Day" to encourage elders who are residing alone and senior citizens living in Chinatown and the nearby estates to participate actively in community event.⁴³

Tzu Chi received its first AIDS referral case from Singapore Communicable Diseases Centre (CDC) in 1998 and since started the provision of medical assistance to patients who are unable to afford the high medical cost. By the end of year 2005, the foundation has provided monetary assistance for medicines to 44 such families. Regular gatherings were also organized for the patients and their families to help build their confidence and pride. In 2003 during the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), Tzu Chi members sent wishes to the beneficiaries by presenting SARS prevention gift bag and greeting cards to their homes. Volunteers made visits to provide emotional support and comfort family members of affected individuals.

Master Cheng Yen speaks of Tzu Chi volunteers as people "who are embedded with the gene of compassion". They work constantly towards relieving the poor and educating them to stand on their own feet, as well as to inspire the rich to give to the

⁴² It is now held at Jing Si Hall in Pasir Ris on a tri-monthly basis and on festive holidays such as Parents' Day, Mid-Autumn Festival, and Chinese New Year to create a celebratory atmosphere for the beneficiaries. A total of more than 104 relief distributions were allocated to the needy. Tzu Chi members have made scheduled visits to welfare organizations and homes. To ensure that the assistance gets channeled to the needy, careful assessment are conducted before the Foundation decides on how to provide long term subsidies or emergency aid. Volunteers then follow up with home visits to the beneficiaries to offer them with continual emotional support.

⁴³ More than 400 seniors, together with the long-term beneficiaries, were invited to the outdoor event held at the Kreta Ayer Square. They are entertained with performances, given health checks and haircut services. It has since become a regular activity which inspires kindness and promotes respect for the elders. These activities are now held at the Tzu Chi branch at Jing Si Hall in Pasir Ris on a tri-monthly basis.

poor. Through participating in various relief and assistance efforts, Tzu Chi volunteers gain a deeper insight into life sufferings. They believe that their work evoked deep compassion and love, which transformed into actions to help people who are suffering.

2.6.2 Medicine Mission

The Singapore Tzu Chi Free Clinic was officially opened on 1 August 2004 by Health Minister Mr Khaw Boon Wan. The clinic provides free internal medicine, traditional Chinese medicine and dental services to its long-term beneficiaries and to lonely elderly people in the Chinatown area. Other recipients include individuals above the age of 60 who live alone, with no next of kin, religious workers, for example priests and nuns, public welfare centers like old folks' homes, orphanages, and centers for the handicapped. In addition to providing medical services, volunteers on duty at the clinic make an effort to communicate with patients who visit the clinic to provide them with care and emotional support. One of the aims of establishing the Free Clinic is to provide local medical practitioners with the opportunity to serve the community and experience the joy of giving without expecting any returns. The clinic hopes to foster a personal and humane approach to medicine within the medical community in Singapore.

The core spirit of free clinic lies in “respecting lives”. By building a medical network, it allows the sick to receive immediate help and care. Medical missions provide medical aid to regions which lack medical facilities and resources by building a resource network internationally. With the support of Tzu Chi International Medical

Association (TIMA)⁴⁴ medical personnel and its volunteers, the Singapore Branch managed to hold 12 overseas free clinics by end 2006. Tzu Chi Singapore Branch held its first medical mission in the neighbouring island of Batam in year 2000.⁴⁵ A total of more than 21,799 patients have benefited from these medical missions.

Dialysis is most frequently used for patients who have kidney failure until a kidney transplant could be done. Initiated in February 2005, the Dialysis Assistance Programme⁴⁶ provides financial assistance to kidney failure patients who cannot afford to pay for their dialysis treatment. Home visit volunteers and members of TIMA conduct monthly visits to the homes of the dialysis patients and provide information on health care and medical treatment for their conditions. In November 2006, Tzu Chi already has 49 dialysis assistance cases under its care.

Hospital volunteers thus play a vital role in creating a comfortable, nurturing care environment for the patients. Tzu Chi volunteers help the patients with washing and trimming their hair or putting up performances. Hospital volunteer programmes require volunteers to undergo basic training. Members have been volunteering at Kwong Wai Shiu Hospital since 1991. In November 2003, Tzu Chi directed some of its charity focus to the Institute of Mental Health located at Buangkok Green. Another of Tzu Chi's hospital volunteer programme is the Children's Cancer ward in the National University Hospital. Tzu Chi volunteers assist in the Supervised Play

⁴⁴ A group of medical practitioners established the Tzu Chi International Medical Association (TIMA) in October 1996. Based on the philosophy of "healing illnesses, healing patients, and healing the heart", TIMA provides medical aid on an international scale. Currently, TIMA has a total of 43 chapters in 22 countries and TIMA Singapore was established on 4 September 1999 by a team of medical practitioners in Singapore.

⁴⁵ As Singapore has a very established welfare system and an advanced healthcare system, TIMA decided to focus on providing medical help to neighbouring countries with limited medical resources. E.g Indonesian islands such as Batam, Bintan and Karimun, and has assisted in free clinics in places like Jakarta, Pekan Baru and the Philippines.

⁴⁶ As long as a patient is unable to finance his / her dialysis treatment, he is able to apply for Tzu Chi's assistance through any hospital social worker or dialysis centre.

Programme developed by the Children's Cancer Foundation (CCF), befriend and interact with children afflicted with cancer.

Tzu Chi organizes health checks and seminars for the general public and information counters for both western and Traditional Chinese medicine are also available. Tzu Chi Singapore Branch has been collaborating with the Red Cross Society since June 2003 to organize blood donation drive, held four times a year.⁴⁷ As of December 2006, the Foundation has conducted 15 blood donation exercises.

In response to Master Cheng Yen's appeal of "saving a life without bringing harm to self," Tzu Chi established the first bone marrow donor registry in October 1993 in Taiwan to help patients with blood diseases. As of November 2005, the registry had collected data from more than 280,000 potential donors, making it the world's largest Chinese bone marrow data bank. Tzu Chi Singapore started the collaboration with Singapore's Bone Marrow Donor Programme (BMDP) in 1997 and has since worked together on a yearly donor recruitment drive. A total of 2004 bone marrow data had been collected by the end of 2005, increasing the hope for survival for victims of blood disease.

2.6.3 Education Mission

Tzu Chi Continuing Education Centre (Singapore)⁴⁸ was inaugurated on 18 December 2005. It operates within the premises of Jing Si Hall which was established with the aim of providing the community with opportunities and a place for life-long learning. There is a Flower Arrangement Classroom, a Tea Appreciation Classroom and a Multi Purpose Classroom designed to suit the needs of the various courses

⁴⁷ The Foundation was commended by the Red Cross Society for its active role and was nominated in 2005 as one of the nation's most active organisers.

⁴⁸ The Singapore's branch is Tzu Chi fourth overseas Continuing Education Centre after Malacca, Kuala Lumpur and Penang.

offered by the Centre. The antique furniture and elegant decoration create a warm and welcoming environment for learning. The Continuing Education Centre currently offers Calligraphy, Flower Arrangement, and Yoga classes geared to the interests of the community. It offers opportunities for life-long learning and enhances one's spiritual well-being.

Tzu Chi started the Children's Enrichment Class to teach children life skills and humanistic values in the monthly sessions. It aims to develop a child's innate ability whilst cultivating a kind nature. During the monthly class activities, Jing Si Aphorisms are taught in the lessons through fascinating stories and interesting games. Similarly, Tzu Chi Teenagers' Class is conducted on every 4th Sunday of the month. By incorporating teachings of humanistic values in the activities, it is hoped that teenagers learn to perform charity and serve the community. During the holidays, a teenager camp is organized for the Tzu Chi Teenagers' Class. A range of activities to build team spirit, fun and lively camp activities such as game stations, talks, drama and video viewing serve as opportunities to achieve spiritual awareness. Visits to Leprosy Home and participation in 'Caring Day for the Elderly' are also opportunities for teenagers to engage with the community.

In 1998, a group of youths from various tertiary institutions formed the Singapore Tzu Chi Collegiate Youth Association. The proliferation of Tzu Chi's humanitarian spirit by the younger generation is evident in the fervent participation in annual youth camps and voluntary work. Tzu Chi youths promote activities at their institutions; invite students to sharing sessions, volunteer training, inspirational talks and fellowship sessions, in keeping with Tzu Chi's beliefs. Many also volunteer at recycling, beach cleaning, book fairs and medical missions. In 2005, the youth association put together a large-scale event - Tzu Chi Youths' Cultural Night which

involved students from National University of Singapore, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore Management University and various tertiary institutions. Youths can interact, build their social networks and also encourage one another's participation in Tzu Chi activities to promote the missions and teachings of Tzu Chi. As the youths learn more about Tzu Chi, they are able to develop a better understanding of the organization.

2.6.4 Humanitarian Mission

Cheng Yen's goal in helping mankind is to humanize the Buddhist teachings and bring bodhisattvas into this world. Maintaining this spirit and goal, Tzu Chi aims to purify the spiritual sphere and to promote social harmony and peace through its humanitarian missions. Tzu Chi Singapore established its Cultural Centre⁴⁹ in July, 1996. The functions of the Cultural Centre includes organizing exhibitions which features Tzu Chi cultural articles and its accomplishments, circulation of cultural articles and running a series of cultural activities. Besides participating in the annual Singapore World Book Fair, and holding various talks and sharing sessions, the Cultural Centre also translated Still Thoughts (and recorded them on cassettes), the sutra on filial piety, and other written works by Master Cheng Yen into English in order to promote Tzu Chi's publications to the English-speaking members.

⁴⁹ An important quality which Tzu Chi upholds would be "Truth, Beauty and Goodness" in its mission of humanity (人文真善美). At different events, a combination of photographs with explanatory notes and video recordings are used to depict the "truth, beauty and goodness" of Tzu Chi members interacting with the community. At the initial stage, there were only pictures with wordings and audio-visual recordings are now included. The objective is to witness and record the goodness and beauty of this era resulting from Tzu Chi's humanistic work. There are members in charge of different components such as writing of reports, news reporting, artistic design, video recording, information gathering, and publication of periodicals. The Cultural team works with Taiwan HQ closely so that news from Singapore can be shared with Tzu Chi's global audience in real time. They are also responsible for producing documentary-style video recordings, a bi-monthly magazine and other publications such as the 10th Anniversary magazine and notices on information boards.

In 1998, the Cultural Centre merged with the branch office and Jing Si Books & Café (静思书轩) opened officially on 14th February, 2004. In addition, the “Jing Si Hut” (静思小竹) on the first floor of the Jing Si Hall has also been established to promote Tzu Chi publications. Every year, Tzu Chi has a booth at the annual World Book Fair⁵⁰, an important cultural event in Singapore. It is aimed that Tzu Chi’s culture can spread to the public through publications that inspire kindness in people towards a path of compassionate love, charity giving and volunteerism.

The practice of sign language is akin to the delivery of a wordless sermon on dharma in Tzu Chi and the first sign language troupe was formed in 1999⁵¹. The sign language musical performance – “Sutra of Deep Gratitude to Parents”, which was staged in 2004, was well-received by the audience and was performed again in 2006. At the opening ceremony of the new Jing Si Hall in Pasir Ris, the sign language troupe presented a complete version of “Thirty-Seven Principles of Enlightenment”. This is an interesting and new way of teaching moral and religious values and it also helps members understand Tzu Chi teachings better as they learn how each sign represents certain meanings and beliefs in Tzu Chi.

Tzu Chi also promotes “The Art of Mindful Vegetarianism” but vegetarianism is not a compulsory practice for its members. According to Cheng Yen, “If one is mindful, eating does not only sustain one’s life but also helps one to cultivate blessings.” Members who practice vegetarianism believe in the declaration of the

⁵⁰ The World Book Fair is an important annual cultural event in Singapore. Numerous publishers and religious organizations participate in the Fair, which attracts almost a million visitors each year. Since 1997, Tzu Chi Singapore has been participating in the Fair annually and a special theme such as “The clear stream of humanity that purifies the human heart” or “Tzu Chi enlightens the mind” is set for each year. Nearly a hundred volunteers work in 3 shifts at the Tzu Chi booth daily. There will also be a display of picture boards with explanatory notes depicting Tzu Chi missions and Tzu Chi members will introduce Tzu Chi to visitors. The annual ten-day book fair provides an opportunity for the volunteers to contribute and promote Tzu Chi.

⁵¹ At Tzu Chi Singapore’s 10th Anniversary Exhibition in 2003, a sign language contest was organized by the Tzu Chi Teachers’ Association. Fifteen teams comprising of children, teenagers, collegiate youth and young community volunteers participated in the contest.

“Four Concepts of Good Health”⁵² and perform “Three Wholesome Actions”⁵³ in their daily eating practices. After the SARS outbreak in 2003, Tzu Chi Singapore has fixed that the month of May is the time when only vegetarian food is to be consumed. Members believe that this can purify their body and mind, and pray for blessings while maintaining a purely vegetarian diet throughout that month. At the charity food fair, demonstrations on the preparation of vegetarian dishes are organized. Members also bring environmental friendly utensils to show their support for environmental protection. With increasing awareness of environmental concerns, members from Tzu Chi Collegiate Youth have incorporated environmental protection into a daily practice by using their own utensils during meal times in schools.⁵⁴

Tzu Chi Singapore branch began its mission of environmental protection in 1999 and there are two key recycling stations - one in the western region (Jurong East) and another in the central area (along Shun Fu Road). Members are encouraged to recycle at home and promote recycling to their neighbours and friends. On every second week of the month, Tzu Chi volunteers will visit the latter’s homes to collect recycled materials which are then sorted out at Jing Si Hall and sold on the same day. Volunteers also organize educational trips to Tzu Chi Melacca branch to learn more about recycling. This is a step towards the goal of “Turning waste into gold, which transforms into a stream of kindness that circulates the earth and nourishes the land, purifying the human mind at the same time”.

⁵² (1) Heart – Broadmindedness and contentment to help one get rid of worries, (2) Vegetarianism – Vegetarian food is good for health and helps to prevent diseases, (3) Eating – Vegetarian food is environmental friendly and helps to prevent calamities and (4) Manners – Courteous and gracious demeanor.

⁵³ (1) Change in Diet – Consuming fresh vegetables and fruits is good for health, (2) Bring your own utensils – Protect the Earth and conserve natural resources through the use of environmental friendly utensils and (3) Make a Wish – Build a good social rapport with people through an improvement in dietary culture.

⁵⁴ In 2004, members of the Tzu Chi Collegiate Youth in the Singapore Management University (SMU) organized a two-day vegetarian charity food fair, which attracted much attention on campus and received a lot of positive feedback from lecturers and students.

The 9/11 incident in the United States of America shocked the world in 2001. Cheng Yen points out that this catastrophe should make us realize that there can only be real peace on earth if every human heart is filled with love. On 13th October in the same year, a campaign entitled “Spread Love to the World, Cultivate a Land of Blessings” (“1013” in Mandarin sounds like “one person, one kind deed”) was launched by Tzu Chi branches worldwide. Tzu Chi Singapore held a candle-light vigil for peace on that day, wishing that love could be spread from people to people through good deeds in the hope of warding off calamities with forces of kindness.

Tzu Chi Singapore hopes to recruit more volunteers who are able to commit themselves to spiritual and humanitarian work that brings harmony to the society under the guidance of Cheng Yen. Tzu Chi’s “Four Missions” and “Eight Footsteps” help create a better tomorrow on earth. During its 40th year, Tzu Chi focused its efforts on deepening its humanistic work. Master Cheng Yen once said, “humanity” is quite different from “culture”. The latter is made up of image expressions whereas the former is the true essence of life derived painstakingly through real life experiences. Therefore, through social and community engagement, Tzu Chi offers opportunities for members to accumulate first-hand experiences in contributing to the society and learning about humanity. Cheng Yen also teaches Tzu Chi members that there is a “sutra” within each person. If we treat one another sincerely with care, we will grow wiser as we gain invaluable insights into the many “human sutras” around us. One of the ways to gain spiritual awareness is achievable through altruistic, charitable deeds and a commitment towards humanitarian concerns in the community.

In Chapter 3, I will analyze the conversion narratives and suggest the multiple factors accounting for “religious alternation” and why individuals in a modern society are attracted to Tzu Chi in their search for a unique religious experience. In Chapter 4,

I argue that Tzu Chi's this-worldly engagement and organizational structure provide a fit for the demand for religion and spirituality. Finally, Chapter 5 will be a discussion on the new religions in Singapore and spiritual humanism as an alternative to understanding religion in a contemporary society.

Chapter 3

Alternating into the Tzu Chi experience

3.1 From religious conversion to religious alternation

In this chapter, I will address the central research question of this study: Why is Tzu Chi popular in Singapore? What are the reasons that can account for Tzu Chi's success in Singapore? I argue that Tzu Chi's appeal to an individual can be explained by a combination of internal and external factors. I will show the unique experiences and encounters of converts to analyse how these accounts shed light on how converts rationalise their participation in Tzu Chi. At another level, it is as important to explore the nature and impact of Tzu Chi's appeal which attracts members to the group.

Before I delve into the details of narratives and conversion accounts of my respondents, a critical appreciation of religious conversion was presented in Chapter 1 which is essential to understanding the processes of religious change, more specifically religious alternation, for a new Tzu Chi member. As discussed earlier, there is a wide spectrum of perspectives presented by scholars who have studied religious conversion. Instead of proposing a single theory for all types of conversion (e.g., Lofland 1977; Seggar and Kunz 1972) or narrowly examine a specific type of religious conversion, this study seeks to introduce the concept of religious alternation (Berger, 1963; Travisano, 1970) as an alternative to the term conversion. When an individual has undergone conversion, it suggests a total change or shift of religious ideals, practices and beliefs from one system to another. However, the religious switching in Tzu Chi does not entail an individual relinquishing one's religious identity for another, but rather one where the importance and focus shifts in emphasis and multiple religious affiliations are managed. I suggest that religious alternation can explain how different groups of members in Tzu Chi are changing, switching and

simultaneously juggling multiple religious memberships as one alternate from one religious system to another. Religious alternation allows Tzu Chi members to have a cumulative identity (Travisano, 1970) as they do not need to sever prior affiliations with other religious institutions or completely convert into Tzu Chi and maintain exclusive membership in a group solely. In my fieldwork, I found that Tzu Chi has a non-Buddhist membership and it is sociologically interesting to analyze how members with other religious faiths can “alternate” between their existing religious systems to a Buddhist group? Why do Christians, Catholics or Hindus join Tzu Chi? What are the various forms of participation which is indicative of their religious alternation in Tzu Chi? The term “religious alternation” can analyse the non-religious ideological and religious change of non-Buddhists.

3.2 Experiential lessons of a “Tzu Chi convert”

The accounts of religious alternation are important narratives to decode the motivation and rationale for joining Tzu Chi. These empirical data are collected as the informants share their experiences in the group allow me to highlight the dominant themes underlying the individuals’ decision to convert and participate in Tzu Chi. From the initial contact point to membership initiation and continuing participation in Tzu Chi, the members have varied experiences if their involvement. Several themes surfaces and the most pertinent were altruism, self-fulfillment and the religious customization at Tzu Chi. Different members attribute different reasons to why they join Tzu Chi as they recount their experiences. I shall discuss these themes and describe how they can account for the religious alternation and attract different groups of people to join Tzu Chi.

3.2.1 “Doing Good” and altruism

The notion of “doing good deeds”, “performing charitable acts” and “giving to the society” are important to the new members who join Tzu Chi. Many members see Tzu Chi as a charitable organization when they first encounter the group and they have no reservations about making monetary donations or contributing to any of the charity missions. For the members, they have a strong belief in “doing good” to benefit society. They are willing to donate money regularly to an established organization reputed for its well-rounded missions in community and welfare services. These members believe that they can contribute to relief efforts, medical subsidy, education and welfare provision. In an affluent society, charity giving is a common practice. The spate of charity fund-raising events featured on national television and news coverage on philanthropic donations are widespread in Singapore. Also, community service and volunteerism are positive qualities that are encouraged. From the interviews, many of my respondents emphasised altruism as an important quality which motivates them in their participation. Many members with an altruistic attitude are eager to be involved in Tzu Chi activities.

I think people generally have a willingness to give and hope to do something to benefit those who are needy and poor in society. This is something very humane, altruistic and giving. The philanthropic culture in Singapore is not something new. Every now and then, you see fund raising shows for organisations like National Kidney Foundation, Thye Hua Kwan Moral Society, Ren Ci Hospital. These events are always well-received. We are taught how to reach out to others when we have the ability to. Being in Tzu Chi is just a long term commitment to pledge my service and volunteer through different channels to do good deeds and help others. Many people come to Tzu Chi because they have an attitude to give and help. (Mrs Tan, 38, Chinese-Buddhist)

Several informants provided accounts of an altruistic attitude to perform charitable acts or spiritual desire to accumulate good karma and merit. There are

members who perform charitable deeds and these actions stem from their belief in “karma” or making merit. Some of my informants introduced the notion of “karma” and “merit” and associated these Buddhist teachings with an altruistic attitude as they describe Tzu Chi’s members’ willingness and eagerness to participate in Tzu Chi. When one believes in “karma”, they understand the cycle of cause and effect in one’s life, a concept in Buddhist philosophies which is incidentally, a fundamental teaching of Cheng Yen. Buddhism relates karma directly to motives behind an action. Motivation usually makes the difference between "good" and "bad", but included in the motivation is also the aspect of ignorance; so a well-intended action from a deluded mind can easily be "bad" in the sense that it creates unpleasant results for the "actor". Thus, an awareness of the concept of “karma” allows one to make a conscious effort, as opposed to being ignorant, to have positive motivation and perform “good” acts. In Cheng Yen’s teachings, she preaches that an individual’s character and life conditions are the result of karma which is accumulated over a number of lifetimes. Thus, karma can account for the different situations encountered by a person. For instance, the wealth, interpersonal relationships, family members, health and career are situational to one’s karma. Nevertheless, karma can be altered or changed. When a person cultivates good moral values and virtues or demonstrates kindness and love in his daily speech and actions, this is a form of self -development that can advance one’s moral condition. This means that individuals are embedded within the environment and society they live in. Collective karma means that people are born and cannot be separated from the rest of the world and society is indeed a vital factor which affects individuals’ moral progress in gaining good or bad karma.

During medical missions to Batam, I witness how impoverished the place was. One ought to give thanks and learn to be thankful for the good life. We take things from granted and sometimes, I cannot help

but think it is karma. As a Catholic, I believe that God has a plan for all. But the teachings relating to the cycle of cause and effect (karma), although is very Buddhist, it is actually quite universal and applicable to explain certain life situations. Of course, I hope that I will develop good karma in my actions. We should give while we can. (Melissa, 19, Chinese-Catholic)

Merit is another important concept in Buddhism and one can gain merit in a number of ways. Merit is accumulated as a result of good deeds, acts or thoughts and that carries over to later in life or to a person's next birth. Such merit contributes to a person's growth towards liberation. In addition, one can "transfer" the merit of an act they have performed to a deceased love one in order to diminish the deceased's suffering in their new existence. According to my informants, honouring others, offering service, involving others in good deeds or being thankful for others' good deeds are the acts that allow one to make merit. Although these two concepts are related to Buddhist philosophies, it remains applicable and relevant to Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike. This may be illustrated in the following interview excerpts:

When I first joined Tzu Chi, my first activity was a visit to the hospital. I always do volunteer work because I hope to help the less fortunate. Learning about the suffering of many people, I learnt to be appreciative of my good karma and blessings to have good health and a wonderful family. I also hope that people with bad karma can slowly change their fate. Doing more charity work, one can help others and such good acts will be brought to the next life. They can learn about what Buddha is teaching his followers. If we have the ability to give, we should share our blessings. (Fu Cheow, 60, Chinese-Buddhist)

Treat others as you would like to be treated. I believe in the saying, Do unto others as they do unto you. Karma is like a cycle and if people learn to demonstrate good values, I am sure they will enjoy blessings in life. Even if Christians do not believe in re-birth, with good karma, my afterlife in heaven is blessed. While we do more good, we gain more merit and eventually, we have a better life. (Joshua, 40, Indian-Christian)

In the above, it was suggested that altruistic behaviour is a solution to modify karma. Altruism not only eliminates bad karma but also creates good karma. Within

the Tzu Chi environment, this group of members seeks to promote good virtue to avert disasters and be blessed with a good life. In participating in the charity events or making donations, these converts hope to accumulate merit and eliminate bad karma. Some pray for good health, fortune and improvements in relationships. They learn from Tzu Chi that gaining merit can only be realized through altruism and moral deeds. Thus, members align their strong resolution to help others, cultivate kindness, and good fortune in order to reach that goal.

These teachings will ensure that any form altruistic and kind acts will translate into blessings. Even if anyone has bad karma, it can improve by accumulating merit. We should start to develop these good habits and we will enjoy a better life. For a Buddhist, it is also the gateway to Buddhism and to comprehend Buddha's teachings. Whether you are a Buddhist or not, having these positive thinking is not enough and Tzu Chi has so many things we can do or help with so that our good thoughts can be expressed. (Mr Lau, 55, Chinese-Buddhist)

As my informants suggest, altruism will only be effective when the good intentions are put into action. This group of members believes in karma and participates in Tzu Chi's charity missions so that their effort can benefit others. In doing so, these Tzu Chi members believe that their actions can change karma or cultivate Buddhist ideals. These converts are able to find various forms of activities established by Tzu Chi which are attractive for them to join and pursue their belief in altruism and motivation to perform good deeds. Members and volunteers in Tzu Chi feel grateful for the chance to serve long-term care recipients and disaster victims. They believe that the misfortune of others provides an opportunity for them to use their ability and help to end others' suffering. In the process of "doing good", they will be able to alleviate the problems in society.

3.2.2 Self-fulfillment

An important theme which was highlighted throughout the interviews with Tzu Chi converts is the sense of self-fulfillment derived from their participation. It is an influential form of emotion and belief which is empowering for the individual, allowing one to engage in the ‘discovery of self’ and seek to achieve a fulfilling and purposeful life.

Contrary to the common belief that religion entails formal membership in mainstream religions, going to churches or temples to worship and pray, the new members who are attracted to Tzu Chi expressed that these symbolic actions are *passé* and they do not agree that religious behavior only constitutes affiliation and occasional visits to a particular religious institution. As the informants spoke of their different religious beliefs and outlook in life, a common issue which they question is the purpose and function of religion and what religion meant to them. Increasingly, many people are starting to discover the meaning of religion in their lives and seeking greater understanding about their existence. Even for religionists who have practiced a particular religion for a significant period, the need for self-fulfillment lacking in their religious practices was a point of awakening which challenged them to assess and re-think their religiosity.

I have been attending Church weekly since I was a child and cell group sessions when I entered adulthood. One day, my Tzu Chi friend asked me about what I learnt from these activities. I couldn’t find an answer. It seemed to me then that I was merely a Christian familiar with the theology and Christian values. Other than that, I am not really sure what else my religion has taught me. I was puzzled... and I felt silly for awhile. But it certainly got me thinking... (Charmaine, 25, Chinese-Christian)

Many new members relate how such changes affect their religious beliefs and outlook in life. For instance, going to the church weekly to hear the pastor’s teachings or attending cell group sessions are no longer meaningful activities to a Christian who

wishes to go beyond comprehending the theology in Christianity. Similarly, there are Taoists who described how burning joss sticks and incense paper which traditionally symbolize the connection between them and sending one's prayers to the gods does not necessarily "fill the gap" in their lives. These individuals are trying to discover the meaning of religion in their lives as they gradually question the practices and teachings of the traditional canons of mainstream religious institutions. In their participation in Tzu Chi, they derive a rewarding sense of self-fulfillment. Many informants emphasized that joining Tzu Chi allows their religious beliefs and acts to be translated into actual practice which they feel, will benefit the society and this provides a meaningful purpose.

We communicate to the Gods in our own ways but sometimes, religion is simply a relationship with the divine and I cannot comprehend the purpose of having religion in my life. Burning joss sticks and incense paper traditionally symbolizes the connection between us and sending one's prayers to the gods. However, some gaps in life just can't be filled. (Jia Jia, 19, Chinese-Buddhist)

After encountering Tzu Chi, both Charmaine and Jia Jia speak of how the aims, mission and activities in Tzu Chi allow them to seek a deeper understanding of their lives and seek to achieve the spiritual fulfillment in their social engagement. They found that their previous religious systems could not provide them with satisfactory answers or rationale to justify their religiosity. Such converts can choose to retain the previous affiliations, alternate between the different systems and juggle different affiliations or abandon their previous religion.⁵⁵

Tzu Chi provides this group of members who are seeking self-fulfillment with a meaningful and gratifying experience. They are able to align their religious beliefs and find greater purpose in religion as they engage Tzu Chi's action-oriented

⁵⁵ The types of religious alternation, Tzu Chi membership and nature of participation shall be discussed in the later section of this chapter.

activities targeted to benefit the social environment. It is through participation and seeking meaning in one's actions that the convert achieves self fulfillment and understanding that joining Tzu Chi is aimed at helping others. An important incentive for the members' continual participation would be for them to continue developing a sense of self fulfillment gained from their membership. Thus, there was an element of curiosity to discover more about gaining self-fulfillment and ascertain whether there are improvements in one's life.

Self-fulfillment is also important in allowing one to cope well with everyday problems. Due to uncertainties in life, it is inevitable that individuals need to find ways to comfort or grapple with the issues confronting them. When an individual achieves self-fulfillment, they develop a this-worldly orientation which encourages them to make sense of their existence. One of the uncertainties which people encounter would be the issue of death;

It is natural that people fear death. It can happen anytime, anywhere and some people try to overcome it using religion. As Tzu Chi members, we help the dead and chant the names of Buddha to bring Dharma guards to the dead. During the chanting session, we help to reduce the bad karma and prevent the person from being born into an animal. It also expresses our good intentions to accompany the dead as they experience the final path in life. (Alvin, 28, Chinese-Buddhist)

Tzu Chi practices have helped its members overcome the fears and bring about a significant change in attitude is about death. The result from the practice of zhunian 助念 (chanting for the dead) allows Tzu Chi members to feel confident in facing death when they accept that death is a necessary phenomenon in life. A practical and logical Buddhist explanation of death would be relating it to how sleeping means dying and this presents a new dimension to their understanding about death. Since sleeping is a form of temporary death which happen everyday and with one's passing, it signifies a long term separation from the living world.

We should view death as a natural life phase and should be accepted as an ordinary event. Actually, our relationships with the living should be treated as more important and valuable than that with the world of the dead. It is then important for individuals to seek their fulfilment in life as we deal with our everyday problems and worries. (Joe, 42, Indian, Hindu)

With self-fulfillment, my informants expressed that it can reduce the misery and problems of daily life. These converts are able to find satisfaction and meaning in their lives. As they are committed to this-worldly actions of Tzu Chi which can benefit the needy, they are also able to derive contentment and a purposeful life to better manage the uncertainties and worries in life.

3.2.3 Religious Customization

From a rational-choice perspective⁵⁶, I suggest that religious seekers select their religion, become a member of any group and manage their own participation in the religious community. An assumption in this paradigm asserts that humans will act on a rational basis as they seek what is perceived to be rewards and try to avoid costs. Also, a demand and supply relationship between religious seekers and religious entrepreneurs is then asserted. However, there are methodological problems with this approach, and one of which would be the implicit assumption of religious seekers as ‘rational’ and ‘free’ agents’, the unquestioned imputation of ‘rationality’ into religious choice and behaviour which is problematic. It is difficult to determine if individuals act rationally or examine the degree of rationality involved in making a religious choice.

⁵⁶ Rational-choice theory has been used to account for the renewal or decline of religious groups as well as the emergence of new religious movements. It is referred to as a new paradigm to understand religious phenomena as opposed to the phenomenological approaches (Berger and Luckman, 1966; Berger, 1969; Berger et. al. 1973).

Despite these considerations and the fact that individuals are not always completely free to choose, I would like to assert that religious customization is a process which demonstrates how members consciously diversify their religious affiliations. According to my informants, many acknowledge the fact that traditional mainstream religions encourage monotheistic participation and religiosity within a single organization. In order for them to combine their present religious affiliation with Tzu Chi membership, they consider it as a rational decision in pursuit of certain rewards. Within limits of their information and available choice, guided by their preferences and tastes, humans will tend to maximise by attempting to acquire the most and expend the least. When economists apply this principle, they concentrate on efforts to acquire, and retain capital of the monetary variety, but the same principles hold when applied to cultural capital, in this case, religious choices. When we are socialised into a particular culture, we also are investing in it, spending time and effort in learning, understanding and remembering cultural material. For example, the persons raised to be Christians have accumulated a substantial store of Christian culture – a form of cultural capital. When faced with the option of shifting religions, the maximization of cultural capital leads people to prefer to save as much of their cultural capital as they can and expend as little investment in new capital as possible (Iannaccone, 1998, Sherkat and Wilson 1995). In using the concept of religious alternation, this study accounts for how individuals try to maximise their religious switch by retaining the previous commitments and religiosity and combine with a new form of cultural capital. Thus, rational-choice theory remains an attractive theoretical framework to understand religious customization as a rational process and explains for religious alternation in Tzu Chi.

Given the limitations in a rational-choice perspective, I suggest that the usefulness in using an economic approach is in relation to the possible existence of a 'religious market'. In an attempt to move beyond phenomenological approaches to understanding the nature of religiosity among individuals, the rational-choice paradigm seeks to lay greater focus on the 'supply-side' of religious choices (Stark and Iannaccone 1994: 230 -252, Iannaccone 1994: 1180-1211). In a multi-religious society, the use of rational-choice theory thus conceptualizes the religious choices of individuals as existing within a 'religious economy' that may be regulated in various ways (Stark and Bainbridge 1985). This describes the religious marketplace⁵⁷ in Singapore whereby an abundant supply of religious choices and accessibility to different religious organizations would mean that religious switching or conversion is possible. The supply-side will also account for the efforts of religious entrepreneurs who constantly reinterpret, innovate and invent religious thoughts and practices in response to changing social conditions and the varying needs of religious seekers. Also, this paradigm asserts that the levels of religiosity and religious participation during present times are actually higher than any previous point in history, claiming that an alleged 'golden age' of religion had never existed at all in the past (Stark and Iannaccone, 1994: 230-252). The religious revivalism, religious competition and the rise of new religions in Singapore attest to the 'golden age' of religion in society.

Also, I suggest that a robust research on religious alternation should recognize that cultural delimiters must be accounted. For example, the influence of other social actors, peer groups, ethnicity, educational background or even location of residence.

⁵⁷ The idea of a religious marketplace will be discussed again in Chapter 4 (State's management of religion in Singapore).

This research constantly engages with these cultural and contextual⁵⁸ factors to locate reasons for religious alternation in Tzu Chi.

In this religious economy, one approach to understanding the rationale of how individuals select their religious choices would be Iannaccone's portfolio diversification practices⁵⁹ and single religious investment plans⁶⁰ (Iannaccone, 1995). If one were to assume that religion, in general, "involves a great deal of risk" and "people choose their religious behaviour rationally" (1995:285), religious seekers will aim to reduce inherent risks of religious consumptive choices. Individual rationality affects the pursuit of religious goods and behavioural adjustments are anticipated for one to maximize individual utility. Thus, religious practitioners possess agency whether to diversify and practice rituals and beliefs from several religions or devote to one particular faith. Individual agency determines one's decision between the two strategies and selection from the assortment of religious practices which are relevant and important to the religious practitioner.

Unlike traditional single religious plans which limit individuals to exclusive membership in monotheistic religious institutions, individuals in Tzu Chi have the flexibility of choice and freedom to retain connections or continual participation in other religious groups. In this way, members are allowed to "customise" their religious experiences while choosing from the myriad of religions in Singapore. Its religious habitat allows its members to employ any of the strategies, portfolio diversification practices or single religious investment plans (Iannaccone, 1995) in choosing their faith and practices from the religious marketplace.

⁵⁸ In the later section of this chapter, I will introduce the concept of dual-sphere framework and in Chapter 4, a detailed analysis on Tzu Chi's organizational structure. These sections will describe the cultural, structural and contextual factors to account for why an individual joins Tzu Chi and alternates between different religious groups.

⁵⁹ It refers to an assortment of religious affiliations, practices from different religions or institutions.

⁶⁰ It refers to an exclusive, single membership in a particular religious institution and adherence to the practices, teachings and beliefs of the group solely.

I am actively participating in the overseas missions with my Church. However, I realised that I can continue to give more to other groups. When I came to Tzu Chi, I was really glad that I could serve the community with other members although I am a Christian. Going to church does not mean that I am not welcomed here. I am glad that I can choose activities that I am comfortable with. The friends and leaders at Tzu Chi do not mind my religion at all. Initially, I was worried I had to convert to be a Buddhist. After awhile, I was convinced that I could just be who I am. They accept me for who I am and our heart still beat as one despite the differences in religious values. We all have the same intent, to serve and to share. Even the Master's teachings are relevant and logical and I do not have problems accepting them. It's just that I do not perform Buddhist rites or actions. (Shelen, 52, Chinese-Christian)

My college friend introduced me into Tzu Chi. She knew I actively participate in some Buddhist camps and casual gatherings organised by the temple network. However, there were very few activities that were regularly conducted. I wanted something different. Apart from Buddhist studies class, I was starting to wonder what really meant for me as a Buddhist. I started joining the elderly visits team and volunteering as a helper during the sharing sessions. During the holidays, there is so much more I can do, I come for choir and join the classes. I even brought my mother to the Flower Arrangement course once. What is most important is that my participation here does not restrict me from going to the temples or be a member of other networks. Unlike my friends who are members of certain Church or group which discourages them external participation, I juggle everything well and I am glad I can choose the activities and suit my lifestyle. Even my parents are starting to come to Tzu Chi but they still go to the Buddhist or Taoist temples. (Rachel, 22, Chinese-Buddhist)

In achieving the four key missions, there is an array of social-humanistic and religious activities⁶¹ at Tzu Chi that are attractive to members from other religious or social groups who seek to fulfill certain needs or find lacking in their own institution. As individuals in the religious marketplace are presented with options, they can choose selectively and create a blend of religious practices which is meaningful, relevant and applicable to their lifestyles and beliefs. As I have discussed earlier, the concepts of “doing good”, altruism and gaining self-fulfillment are reasons for conversion into Tzu Chi. These qualities are experienced and taught through many

⁶¹ This concept shall be discussed in the later section of this section which describes Tzu Chi's dual-sphere framework.

activities in Tzu Chi which are appealing and applicable to these converts. With religious customization, Tzu Chi members are allowed to mix and match various activities, religious and social, offered in Tzu Chi and other religious institutions. Thus, within an organization like Tzu Chi, it is possible to locate a multi-religious membership where members of different religious faiths co-exist within a Buddhist organization. From the above, Shelen's and Rachel's religiosity can be a combination of religious acts from various religious traditions as they negotiate their religious membership in a Buddhist organization and selectively participate in the Tzu Chi activities.

Religious customization has created a multi-religious membership profile which is unique to Tzu Chi. There are members of different religious faith; Taoist, Buddhist, Christians, Hindus, Catholics and different categories of members; exclusive Tzu Chi members, non-Buddhists who practice other religions simultaneously or Buddhists or Taoists who find Tzu Chi complementary to their religious beliefs. Non-Buddhists who are interested in joining Tzu Chi can become a member and need not necessarily convert to Buddhism. For those with other religious faiths, they are not required to abandon their religious affiliations and beliefs since they can practice other religious beliefs apart from Buddhism. The multi-religious membership suggests a different type of religious alternation dependent on the affiliations which a member decides to combine or alternate between. The religious alternation for a Hindu-Tzu Chi member, a Catholic-Tzu Chi member or a Buddhist-Tzu Chi member is different. Each of these members customise a set of religious beliefs and practices which is unique to them. Furthermore, the converts might be attracted to different activities or have a different nature or degree of participation as they alternate between the religions. Converts have their own type of religious customisation and religious alternation cannot be

understood as a universal or singular episode.⁶² Tzu Chi provides an alternative to the unitary and exclusive membership structure in religious organization which does not promote or permit portfolio diversification practices.

3.3 Tzu Chi's Structural formula

Several structural factors which are linked to the conversion accounts can be understood as impetus which promotes and facilitates the individuals' decision to convert. By examining the organizational structure, Tzu Chi activities and membership, how do Tzu Chi members develop new meaning systems or understand their everyday religiosity? Why is Tzu Chi so popular in Singapore to the extent that its popularity can surpass racial and religious categories?

3.3.1 Dual-sphere framework: Religious and social-humanistic

Looking at the Tzu Chi's activities and teachings, I am proposing that Tzu Chi operates on a dual-sphere framework which serves to fulfil two functions; religious and social-humanistic. Such a framework is appealing to converts who can be attracted to Tzu Chi due to religious or social-humanistic reasons.

Tzu Chi is similar to charity organizations, interest groups or community clubs and at the same time, a religion. People join Tzu Chi for various reasons. Some find it as a suitable religion and many combine it with their own religion. Like me, I'm a Hindu but I enjoy doing charity with Tzu Chi. (Bhavani, 24, Indian-Hindu)

Many of my informants also suggest that a dual-sphere combination provides wider range of activities and can attract wider membership in comparison to a religious institution that only focuses on religious activities.

⁶² The different kinds of religious alternation shall be analysed in the membership types in Tzu Chi.

I guess it will benefit the members greatly, they have more to choose from. This can also be beneficial for new members of those who want to convert. They do not need to worry about religious differences. So, we can bring in members from any religion. (Mr Lau, 55, Chinese-Buddhist)

Like other new religions like Soka Gakkai or Sai Sathya Baba, Tzu Chi also promotes a social-humanistic component that promotes this-worldly actions to help, provide assistance and welfare to the needy. In Tzu Chi, the emphasis on engaging the members in community work, promoting charity and social work is extensive. It has developed strong programmes in its charity mission and the dual-sphere framework is a niche for Tzu Chi in the religious economy. It is able to distinguish itself from a religious group which performs religious function per se. At the same time, it has the ability to reach out to converts on either religious, social-humanistic or both aspects.

For the religious seekers, such a structural feature offers them more choices in their religious customization. When converts join Tzu Chi, they can select activities from the social-humanistic or religious domain. They can also choose to be a Tzu Chi member exclusively or combine different options in the religious marketplace and diversify his religious experiences. It is clear then as Berger and Luckmann (1966) rightly argued that such transformation takes place in the individuals' subjective reality. Religious alternation can take place with the availability of plausibility structures as 'legitimizing apparatus' to validate individuals' subjective realities which are transferred and internalized through the individual's interactions with significant others in the religious community (Berger and Luckmann, 1966:177-179). I argue then that religious alternation can be examined within a dual-sphere framework. By analyzing my informants' alternation experiences and narratives of change in religious life, daily rituals or religious participation, I suggest that the dual-

sphere framework is an important apparatus which allows members to adhere to and alternate between their identity as members of traditional religions and Tzu Chi.

Within a dual-sphere framework, converts can negotiate their religious membership and this makes it possible for an organization, classically termed as a Buddhist group, to extend its membership to non-Buddhists. In this way, a Hindu can continue to worship Hindu gods or a Catholic can go for his mass at church. These members can also subscribe to the social-humanistic aspect of Tzu Chi which performs functions lacking or absent in their religious organization. There are also Buddhists who join the religious activities in Tzu Chi and participate in social or charitable activities at other religious institutions. This gives rise to a multi-ethnic and multi-religious membership in Tzu Chi and different categories of members. How do we differentiate these two spheres in Tzu Chi? It is pertinent to examine the structural conditions and I shall explain the religious and social-humanistic spheres in Tzu Chi. This will then allow my research to shed light on how Tzu Chi's dual-sphere framework can successfully accommodate a multi-religious and multi-religious membership where members can mediate their religious participation and religiosity.

Seeking the religious

One of the key factors to account for the long-term commitment and continuing appeal of Tzu Chi to its members would be the religious teachings and ideology of Tzu Chi which is aligned with Buddhism. As elaborated in Chapter 2, Tzu Chi has a regular schedule of religious activities; "communal cultivation" (共修- Gong Xiu), talks (上人开示 - Shang ren kai shi) by Cheng Yen, religious ritual (礼拜法华经序绕佛绕法共修 – Libai Fahua Jing XuRao, FoRao Fa Gong Xiu) or sharing sessions.

Many informants suggest that these religious activities are meaningful events for them to learn about Buddhism.

The sessions help me find out about religious teachings, share my religious knowledge and cultivate a better understanding. I am especially touched when I hear the talks by Master Cheng Yen. I am motivated to practice Buddhism and feel curious about learning more. Some people think that religion is difficult to learn or know about but the religious activities are simple and clear. (Mr Low, Chinese-Buddhist, 44)

The core doctrine of Tzu Chi Buddhism is Xing Pusa Dao (行菩薩道) which is to actually do or perform good deeds that will benefit others. Instead of chanting or doing meditation, members are asked to observe Buddha's teachings through their practical actions. Such a practice reflects a this-worldly orientation aimed to promote religion as well as social and community engagement. Hence, it is not sufficient for a religion to simply impart doctrinal teachings without a practical approach to comprehend the essence and value beneath these religious ideas. In this way, one can understand how the two domains in Tzu Chi's dual-sphere framework can be understood as complementary for a Buddhist to understand and practice the ways of being a Buddhist.

Tzu Chi differentiates itself from the "Chinese-temple Buddhism" (Ling, 1963:63), which refers to the occasional temple visits and worship of different deities from Chinese religions. In focusing on engaging with the community, converts are able to constantly shape and seek meaning in their own lives as they seek to reach out to other people. Potential converts who are drawn to the practicality of Engaged Buddhism (人间佛教) promoted in Tzu Chi. As one member muses,

"Tzu Chi ren (慈济人) do not just get together, worship and pray for our own selfish needs. We know that there is a lot of suffering and hardship in this world we live in. When we come together and share what we are able to give. This is the real gift of life, you learn as you

live (做中学，学中慧). When I do recycling, I really can understand how it feels to be a rag-and-bone man or those elderly who collect tin cans at hawker centres. I appreciate the life I have and feel grateful that I am a lot luckier than many people who have to struggle and make a living. At the same time, I also learn that we must treasure resources and not be wasteful. I try to tell these important recycling messages to the people I meet and the households we visit. Tzu Chi does not just teach us about what Buddha says. Our Master stresses the contemporary issues and teaches us how to follow Buddha teachings and apply it to our lives. Issues like global warming and environmental protection, I learnt it when I go for our gatherings and talks and how to be a better person and citizen. I am glad that I can contribute and try to make a difference.” (Annie, 64, Chinese-Taoist)

The popularity of Tzu Chi in contemporary societies can be understood in how individuals are increasingly seeking a different religious experience. My informants suggested that religious acts like visiting temples, chanting, praying have always been interpreted by many as a way to practice Buddhism. However, they mentioned that uncertainties in life and disasters which cannot be explained through scientific or rational approaches have increased the vulnerability of the human condition. As one turns to religion, many are looking for avenues where they can achieve self-fulfilment, a purposeful participation and learning journey as they seek to understand and learn about religion. Within such a religious landscape, Tzu Chi is able to thrive and promote ideas of world transformation, in line to the concept of Engaged Buddhism which parallels Buddhist teachings. While individuals are learning religious teachings, they also engage in secular actions. There are plentiful avenues for religious seekers to practice values which they learn from religious teachings.

In the example of recycling activities and participating in environmental protection efforts, Tzu Chi members are able to conduct charitable work and actively engage with the society. Tzu Chi members expressed these activities at Tzu Chi is practical and realistic. While many religious organizations propagate the learning of religious texts and cultivation of values and morals, the action oriented approach in

Tzu Chi embarks on different projects to directly impact the society. From these efforts, it is hoped that the members are able to achieve religious cultivation and knowledge as they learn from the human suffering and problems which people face. They are able to understand and practice Engaged Buddhism which is relevant to the modern believer who seeks to learn about Buddhism, understand the tenets in the religious teachings and make sense of one's religious behaviour and identity.

As suggested by my informants, they commit themselves to helping the poor and educating the rich by reverently accepting the Buddha's teaching of "Great compassion to strangers and great mercy for all".

Tzu Chi members believe that we should follow Venerable Dharma Master Yin Shun's teachings to "Be constantly committed to Buddhism and to all living beings." With love, compassion, joy and unselfish giving, they strive to bring about the pure world of Tzu Chi by helping the needy, giving joy and eliminating suffering. Tzu Chi invites all people of goodwill to cultivate a field of blessings and create a society of love. (Mrs Johan, 35, Indian-Buddhist)

In doing charity work and performing good deeds, one would be blessed with good karma and accumulate merits. Buddhist ideals are seen as relevant to individuals in cosmopolitan society and have a bearing on humanity and social order. The practical and this-worldly approach in Tzu Chi presents a stark contrast from the waving of joss sticks, worship of deities or chanting and meditation classes in other Buddhist groups. Tzu Chi Buddhists are able to acquire knowledge of Buddhism through their actions and religious meetings which bridge the gap between theory (Buddhist teachings) and practical (Engaged Buddhism, 人间佛教). In the teachings of karma, making merit or humanitarianism, Tzu Chi propagates the social role of religion's responsibility to society so its salvation placed more stress on the community and a this-worldly orientation. To the members, altruistic actions means showing of compassion and a humanitarian concern for the society.

Tzu Chi is different from any other Buddhist group. We have avenues to learn about Buddhism and comprehend the teachings. For me, I am able to understand my actions and religious practices. This is a move away from out-dated myths that Buddhist faith is imparted through strict religious classes by ordained monks or monastic life as the ultimate goal of religion, temple-going to worship or seek favours from deities. (Yee Ling, 22, Chinese-Buddhist)

Members also speak of how their “Master does not encourage us to escape living problems and study sutras in mountains. In contrast, she wants use to experience hardship in life and care for others with love, only then can we appreciate our own life”. Indeed, a this-worldly orientation attracts potential converts who are seeking for practical ways and methods to practice their religious beliefs. More importantly, they no longer have to grapple with the struggle to internalize canonical Buddhist teachings without comprehending the real purpose or meaning in doing so. They feel that Engaged Buddhism and a this-worldly orientation is a move away from the dilemma and they are able to make sense of their beliefs and incorporate them in their daily actions. Many of my informants expressed that they can find a more satisfactory explanation for life from Buddhism and they believe that Buddhism is a logical form of teaching which enables them to deal with life and accept their living conditions.

In comparing with traditional ways to interpret Buddhism, many Tzu Chi members feel that Tzu Chi’s way of practice provides them with opportunities to understand religion and relate to it in their daily lives. Instead of focusing on religious classes and interpreting Buddhist texts and scriptures among its members, there is a conscious effort to incorporate the community who can potentially benefit from the labour of Tzu Chi members. This section has highlighted some religious activities of Tzu Chi members. Indeed, Tzu Chi is “the subject of a growing number of academic studies both in Taiwan and abroad. This organisation represents one of the best known

examples of a trend known as ‘Buddhism for the human realm’ (Engaged Buddhism - 人间佛教), a movement that emerged in China at the beginning of the twentieth century, and that promotes the practice of charity as a means to attain salvation” (Laliberte, 2003: 245). Tzu Chi teachings imply a this-worldly orientation which is appealing to its members who also consider the teachings as very secular. Religion, while embracing a this-worldly approach has inevitably become socially engaged with the community to the extent that it sometimes can blur the boundaries whether Tzu Chi is a religious institution or a social group. This idea shall be extrapolated in the section on the social in Tzu Chi.

Finding the social-humanistic

Tzu Chi’s dual-sphere serves the functions of reaching out to both the religious practitioners and social participants. Tzu Chi’s well-established and structured organization differentiates it from charity groups or religious institutions. Although it is known as a “Buddhist” institution, it plays an active role in the community engagement and social welfare. The social-humanistic programmes have been so successful that it attracts non-Buddhists and removes religious barriers for converts to join Tzu Chi.

Tzu Chi Foundation has gathered many members to render their services to the community. Tzu Chi volunteers reach out to the community with the goal of worldly salvation so that there will be a harmonious society where disaster and suffering can be avoided. Through the promotion of its four missions, there are many opportunities where one can participate in Tzu Chi. This is why I can join and do my bit although I am a Christian. (Huimin, 21, Chinese-Christian)

The established medical and charity missions of Tzu Chi can be likened to any charitable, medical or social organization which aims to provide relief aid, medical assistance or financial assistance to medical care. Under the Medical Mission in

Singapore, Tzu Chi provides financial assistance and emotional support to the needy and HIV patients. For instance, the Tzu Chi Free Clinic provides basic medical checks for the senior citizens and aid recipients in Singapore. Since early 2000, the Singapore Branch has extended its Medical mission by organizing free clinic services twice a year for the sick and poor in neighboring Indonesian islands as Batam, Bintan and Karimun etc. Many of my informants participate in these health-related events. According to them, they feel that the medical missions and voluntary work that they engage in is relevant and useful to mankind. They are able to reach out to the needy, sick and provide support to emergency situations. In doing so, the members feel that these are ways for them to translate their good intentions to achieve purposeful life and meaningful interactions with the people around them.

Members are also strongly encouraged to participate in a range of medical volunteer programmes and home visits. A lot of us are very proud of the most notable efforts of Tzu Chi, the international rescue missions and disaster relief mobilization. It is well-known for its readiness to respond disaster-stricken areas and provide aid, food, health services to those who are in need. As participants, we will learn how to be giving, how to share and work as a group. (Shelen, 52, Chinese-Christian)

My informants also described how Tzu Chi caters for educational and self-development programmes for the population. The Tzu Chi Education Mission in Singapore has a Continuing Education Centre which facilitates the spreading of Tzu Chi culture and humanity through classes such as Flower Arrangement, Chinese Calligraphy, Tea Arts and Sign Language for the general public. Also, activities like inspirational talks, beach cleaning exercises are well-received.

We have members in many classes at our centre. Members can learn how to cultivate important social values, build friendships and develop a good character while participating in the classes and learning new skills. Tzu Chi members are also taught important values about culture, education. We are constantly conscious about the society we live in and we try to inculcate a humanitarian vision and benefit people

through different activities. For instance, environmental concerns are pressing issues. Various recycling points have been set up in different parts of Singapore. These efforts are to encourage community participation and to enhance the cohesiveness within the local neighbourhood. (Mdm Toh, 35, Chinese-Catholic)

In the interviews, my informants described how Tzu Chi functions like a social club. The range of community events, interest groups and classes are organised with the aim to promote social-humanistic values which are in line with the missions of Tzu Chi; Charity, Medicine, Education and Humanitarian. Cultural events, exhibitions or talks are initiatives to share the teachings and efforts of Tzu Chi with the public. In Tzu Chi, blessings are cultivated through acts of kindness. Members believe that the more one is able to give, the more one is able to experience the joy from giving. This will also create a cycle of loving-kindness and continues when more people share this belief. Cultivating a compassionate and altruistic spirit are key themes promoted through talks on “Blissful Life”, “Spread Love to the World” as well as educational talks in schools. My informants share how these talks and sharing sessions have inspired them to join Tzu Chi as volunteers and work together as they aim to spread love to the world and bring harmony to the society. In these sessions, the CEO of Tzu Chi Singapore, Brother David Liu and other volunteers will be invited to share their experiences in doing charity work. In addition, sign language performances and video records of the Master’s speeches are also included in the programme for audience to understand the rationale of the social-humanistic values and practices.

Through these activities, converts will be able to mingle in a social setting which promotes important humanistic values like helping the poor and needy, developing a good moral character, ascetic lifestyle, doing charity and cultivating an altruistic attitude, encouraging the spirit of humanitarianism and lifelong learning to improve one’s knowledge and skills and be connected with society.

In Singapore, many members participate in environmental activities not for the expression of a larger love of nature but aimed as a realization of self-discipline and thriftiness. In Tzu Chi, learning to be frugal and not waste materials is taught as a good virtue. Thus, recycling activities allow people to learn the meaning of these values. There are various recycling points for Tzu Chi members and the general public to bring recycled materials to these collection centres. In the 19th issue of Singapore Tzu Chi World Journal, the main picture on the cover page illustrates a Tzu Chi member who is participating in a beach-cleaning programme, an activity which is part of the environmental protection group. On the headline of this publication, it states “弯腰捡起丢掉的福气：爱大地从环保做起” (Bending one’s back to pick up the fortune which was thrown, begin with recycling to love the environment). Not only does it highlight the recycling efforts of individuals, it demonstrates the humility, humanitarian commitment and worldly concern of Tzu Chi members in the midst of cultivating desirable moral virtues.

In a dual-sphere framework, the social-humanistic domain of Tzu Chi also creates a community spirit⁶³ which strengthens the group ties among members. Furthermore, my informants highlighted that the social events differentiate Tzu Chi from most religious organizations where activities are often associated of loaded with religious teachings.

Tzu Chi’s activities are planned with no reference to religious doctrines and practices. Members participate in voluntary work. They could be in the volunteer programmes which perform home visits or organize activities. It is not about teaching religion. (Fadzel, 35, Malay-Muslim)

In some religious institutions, converts are introduced to the group with an intrinsic aim to proselytize and spread religious faith. However, Tzu Chi’s social-

⁶³ This idea will be explored again in the organizational culture and community in Tzu Chi (Chapter 4).

humanistic events are not intertwined with religious practices or developed to proselytise Buddhism.

When I first came to Tzu Chi, I was hesitant. I did not believe my friend when he said it was alright for non-Buddhists to come. I was afraid that they would convert me. Sometimes, you need to see if for yourself! I was truly amazed the first few times. There was really no talk about Buddhism or anything. I was happy to be invited and could even comfortably tell the others that I'm a Hindu. As a volunteer, you just do your job and the activities are meant to teach us how to reach out to people and develop our humanistic character. (Bhavani, 24, Indian-Hindu)

Religious affiliation is no longer important makers of identity are not important but rather, the common goal for humanity⁶⁴ is a key quality for Tzu Chi members. Unlike most religious groups which aim to proselytize religious faith through social activities, Tzu Chi has a different focus compared to those socio-religious activities. At Evangelical or Charismatic Christian groups, converts are usually invited for friendship groups, church events, and carnival and these sessions are introduction to religious ideology and they might proceed to join cell groups and prayer group sessions. Tzu Chi takes on a hands-off approach in preaching religion. The distinction between religious and social-humanistic activities differentiates the nature of the activities and converts need not overcome the usual fear of resisting the underpinning agenda of religious conversion.

The social-humanistic sphere is not tainted with religious connotations but emphasizes on building strong social-community bonds and promoting humanitarian concerns. Many converts who are non-Buddhists feel comfortable working together with Tzu Chi members and the sense of community is very strong. They appreciate the cooperative and team-building activities shared in Tzu Chi.

⁶⁴ The idea of humanity will be discussed in Chapter 5 analysis of spiritual humanism and new religions in Singapore.

“Being together with other Tzu Chi members embarking on the various missions strengthen their relationships as they are work together and understand one another better. I can feel the self-development and growth through the participation at free clinic and social visits. When I am working with other members, I have good opportunities to learn about my own weaknesses and strengths from a group of companions whom she trusts and confide in. We work together and grow together and help those who are suffering. If we can give, we will do our best. And the friendships I found in Tzu Chi are significant and important to my life.” (Melissa, 19, Chinese-Catholic)

Apart from the strong sense of community, Tzu Chi provides a stable and efficient infrastructure for them to channel their energy and goodwill. Another of my informant shares the same sentiments as he recounts his experience:

“I came to Tzu Chi because my wife received help from Tzu Chi volunteers. She could go for dialysis because of their help. We had no one by our side. Everyone avoided us and now I come to help when I can, there are many things I can do to help the others. They treat me like one of them even though I am not a Buddhist. (Azly, Malay-Muslim, 63)

New-comers are welcomed into the group as a visitor and never pressured to undergo religious conversion. They discover the group, build friendships and are presented with a web of opportunities to suit their preferences. With the warm friendships and social interactions, it creates a favourable situation which cocoons the participants and attracts them to convert. Furthermore, religious customisation would mean that potential converts are at liberty to select their participation and customise their experiences. Arguably, non-Buddhists can be attracted into a Buddhist organization as they can participate freely in the events and need not fear religious proselytisation or conversion. These social activities are available for anyone, regardless of religious background, to join, interact or bond with other like-minded individuals and Tzu Chi members.

Another quality which Tzu Chi promotes would be filial piety which is seen to be best realized through worldly concern.

Tzu Chi's adopts a this-worldly orientation as its efforts are directed to reach out to the society. Members are always hoping to receive wisdom through their daily actions. Moving away from traditional religious approach where one believes that the conscientious study of scriptures and meditation can enhance wisdom, Tzu Chi's action-oriented approach can actually bring direct impact to improve people's lives. The experiences of learning from and interacting with people are first-hand life experiences which allow one to appreciate life and learn to be giving. We learn to be giving and cultivate the humanistic nature and be concerned about the societal problems. (Sharon, 36, Chinese-Taoist)

Tzu Chi members promote the culture of filial piety and humanistic vision as they invest time and effort directed for a charitable cause to develop good virtues. In this way, filial piety, an important quality emphasized in Asian culture, taught in Tzu Chi also provides a binding force to gel members regardless of their religious faiths. It is a basic familial teaching imparted over generations which Tzu Chi members practice and promote. The importance of such fundamental values has a universal meaning system to make religious boundaries porous such that non-Buddhists in Tzu Chi can identify with such teachings. In the social-humanistic participation, Tzu Chi members are taught to be mindful of their actions and speech and they try to achieve good moral cultivation and improve their inter-personal relationships. These values are applicable and comprehensible to non-Buddhists and certainly do not conflict with other religious teachings.

Tzu Chi members, especially the non-Buddhists, rationalize their participation in a community group which has a social-humanistic culture different from a typical religious institution which has social activities with religious underpinnings. They are able to accept the friendships and social networks within Tzu Chi without any discrimination or conflict regardless of religious backgrounds. Going to the Tzu Chi

activities is likened to gathering in an interest group or social club. Some members even develop close relationships with other Tzu Chi members while embarking on the various missions.

The significance of its sense of community, group ties and social activities demonstrates how the “social” is not laden with “religious” doctrines and teachings. At the same time, Tzu Chi is still a religious institution which offers religious classes and functions as a religious site. The dual-sphere, social and religious allows one to negotiate his religious identity and participation. It offers membership in a Buddhist organization yet maintaining prior religious affiliation which might not directly align with Buddhist teachings.

3.3.2 Multi-religiosity & forms of Tzu Chi membership

Tzu Chi’s dual-sphere organizational framework allows it to develop a niche in the religious marketplace. As mentioned earlier, in a secular society with different ethnic and religious groups, there are various religious options which create a marketplace where religious seekers can make choices and select an appropriate and suitable religion. With a variety of activities and choices for one to diversify and customise his religious experience, members are not restricted from other choices in the marketplace. As a Tzu Chi member, one is allowed to combine Tzu Chi membership and customize his religious experiences. Individuals can choose portfolio diversification (Iannaccone, 1995) and create a blend of practices which is meaningful, relevant and applicable to their lifestyles and beliefs. Religious customization gives rise to religious alternation when members mix and match various activities, religious and social, offered in Tzu Chi and other religious institutions and alternate between the different religious organizations.

As I suggested in the beginning of this chapter, religious alternation for Tzu Chi members is an important analytical concept to understand the multi-religious and multi-racial membership. The alternating identities of Tzu Chi members can be examined by looking at three categories of participation in Tzu Chi; (i) Religious, (ii) Religious-Social, (iii) Social as a result of members' customized religious experience in a dual-sphere Buddhist organization. The purpose of having a typology serves as a heuristic device to describe and understand the nature and form of membership, religiosity and involvement within each category. As an analytical tool, these ideal types are not intended to map out or classify members into distinct categories for cross-comparisons. Rather, it highlights and explains the pertinent characteristics within a category so that one could make sense of the religious alternation for Tzu Chi members. Contrary to religious profiling to pigeonhole religious seekers into rigid or singular religious labels, these variations of religiosity provide an alternative to understanding religious faith or practices and more importantly, explaining religious alternation.

Typology	Religious	Social-Humanistic	Nature of Participation
Group 1 Tzu Chi Buddhist	Only Tzu Chi Buddhism No other religious faith/ affiliation	Primary focus on religion but selected social activities with the aim of practicing or understanding religion.	Only Religious
Group 2A Tzu Chi Buddhist	Tzu Chi Buddhism Taoism Confucianism Mahayana Buddhism Theravada Buddhism Hinduism	All / Selected Tzu Chi social activities	Religious & Social-Humanistic
Group 2B Tzu Chi Member	Christianity & Catholicism ⁶⁵	All/Selected Tzu Chi social activities	Religious & Social-Humanistic
Group 3 Tzu Chi member	Christianity Catholicism Islam	Selected Tzu Chi social activities	Only Social-Humanistic

Table 1: Typology of Tzu Chi Membership

⁶⁵ In my fieldwork, I found that some Christians and Catholics belong to Group 2B. Majority of the Christians and Catholics belong to Group 3 and participate ONLY in social-humanistic activities. Interestingly, those who are classified in 2B are individuals who will consider attending religious ceremonies occasionally. Such a practice is not encouraged since the religious worldviews of a Christian or Catholic are extremely divergent with Buddhism. However, it is of sociological significance that I must create a distinction of these Catholics or Christians in Group 2B as opposed to those in Group 3 to examine how they manage their religiosity and provide different accounts to rationalize Tzu Chi participation.

The key criteria for Tzu Chi membership would be commitment and ability to contribute manpower, time or economic resources to the group. The choice of religious practices and teachings is a subjective process and personal experience. While some adherents believe that their religion is a monotheistic faith will not “mix and match” any other practices from other religious organizations, others can be comfortable with polytheistic practices like going to a Catholic church and even a Taoist temple to fulfill their religious needs. In the earlier sections, I have discussed on the religious customisation at Tzu Chi as well as the dual-sphere framework in Tzu Chi’s organization. Thus, Tzu Chi is able to offer portfolio diversification practices or single religious investment plans (Iannaccone, 1995) to its members. With these concepts in mind, I shall now proceed to describe the membership patterns, nature of participation of Tzu Chi members.

(i) Group 1 – Religious

Tzu Chi’s religious domain is an important and influential body that provides a platform for Buddhist members to gather for religious meetings, learning groups, Dhamma talks and meditation sessions.

I used to go from temple to temple and join many Buddhist groups. However, I did not stay on for long. Sometimes, the teachings are too irrelevant or it becomes too focused on monastic life. I enjoy what I learn at Tzu Chi. It is religion, Buddhism and it always focuses on practical issues. We can share and learn from other Brothers and Sisters and cultivate Buddha’s teachings. We can go for Dhamma classes, sharing sessions, communal cultivation. There are different groups to join and choose from. (Mei Choo, 48, Chinese-Buddhist)

My parents are religious Buddhists. They talk about Buddhism in our daily lives. But, I did not understand some terms or ideas they shared. When I was young, I followed what they did. Eventually, I was able to follow my mother to Tzu Chi when she enrolled me in the youth class and that was where I learnt about religion. For the first time, it is making sense to me through meaningful and fun activities. (Xing Yong, 21, Chinese-Buddhist)

In contrast with traditional Chinese religion facing a decline, due to general dissatisfaction with the rituals and belief systems and an ignorance of the tenets and lack of religious instruction (Tong, 1992: 298), Tzu Chi's efficient and well-planned religious activities overcomes these barriers. For Group 1 members like Mei Choo and Xing Yong, they are able to subscribe to Tzu Chi's Buddhism and understand Buddhist theological and religious teachings in a systematic and organized religious structure as these individuals shift away "from an unthinking and passive acceptance of religion" (Tong, 2007:4).

I've been hoping to find somewhere that I can join for a long term. It is better to stick with the same group and learn with the same people. A lot of Buddhists go to so many temples and mix all the different styles of Buddhism. I think I would prefer sticking to just one pure type, a conventional form of Buddhist beliefs (Mrs Loh, 40, Chinese-Buddhist)

Many Group 1 members are religious practitioners believe in religious purity to the extent that they are in search of one orthodox form of Buddhism. These members do not "mix and match" beliefs, rituals or practices from other religious faiths or organizations but seek to establish a distinct set of Buddhist beliefs. As illustrated in the above excerpt from Mrs Loh's interview, such Group 1 members pledge a clear, untainted, singular allegiance to Tzu Chi and subscribe to its practices. These members do not engage in any religious practices or acts with external temple groups or Buddhist associations. Religious boundaries and membership are clearly defined and this illustrates an extreme degree of single religious plans (Iannaccone, 1995) where one does not just stick to a particular religious faith (Buddhism) but also ensure a single-organization membership (Tzu Chi). So, these Tzu Chi Buddhists do not visit or join other Buddhist institutions and strictly adhere to Tzu Chi's Buddhist teachings and practices.

They are proponents of Tzu Chi Buddhism as a philosophical and logical form of Buddhist teachings. Although there are plentiful options in the religious marketplace, these members are mindful towards maintaining clear boundaries and distinct identity from other religions and even Buddhist organizations. Contrary to the practice where Buddhists can frequent various temples or combine different practices and traditions, the religious affiliation, practices, belief systems and religious behaviour of Group 1 members are exclusive to Tzu Chi solely. In other words, these members devote themselves to Tzu Chi Buddhist teachings and practices taught within Tzu Chi and detach themselves from any other form of Buddhism.

In the interviews, Group 1 members strictly adhere to Tzu Chi's religious teachings and participate actively in religious activities, these members do not join any other religious group and previous religious affiliations, if any, are terminated. My informants emphasized their membership in Tzu Chi's religious activities. However, they are open to participating in some social-humanistic events although it is not a key priority for them. As suggested in one of the interviews:

I will never miss any communal cultivation or sharing sessions. If you think about it, its just three sessions per month in total. I always make the effort to attend them. If my friends ask me to join the mission trips or volunteer work, I will be keen but I guess the religious activities are more important for me. (Bee Leng, 43, Chinese-Buddhist)

In the earlier section on the dual-sphere framework, Tzu Chi promotes the social role of religion to develop a this-worldly orientation and engage with the community to help those who are in need. Tzu Chi's accomplishments in the social-humanitarian aspects are significant in its charity and humanitarian missions. Many of the events are not negligible and often involves majority of its members.

If you ask any Tzu Chi members about what they have done, I'm sure everyone would have helped at some charity event or home visit. Most people started to come to Tzu Chi through activities. We are proud that

the missions have done so much to help others and many Tzu Chi members will always join readily. More hands to help means less people in trouble. Our mission trips and visits are always packed with volunteers. (Wan Yi, 27, Chinese-Buddhist)

Even if I came here for religious purposes, I also helped out at charity bazaar and visits to the old folks' home. It is part of the Tzu Chi experience. (Mrs Huang, 39, Chinese Buddhist)

Thus, religious participants (Group 1) might find themselves involved in social activities occasionally although they profess that their primary consideration in joining Tzu Chi is to find a religious group to learn about Buddhism and they are only concerned about their religious participation to cultivate religious wisdom and knowledge.

(ii) Group 2 – Religious/Social

In Group 2, it represents the group of polytheistic religious seekers who practice portfolio diversification (Iannaccone, 1995). Within this group, the diverse forms and customised experiences are so varied that it allows us to understand religious alternation and types of religiosity. This group of members combines membership in Tzu Chi and other religious institutions as well as worship more than one religious figure. They are able to juggle multiple memberships and alternate between the different religions or institutions. Group 2 members practice other religious forms, interpreted as complementary to their needs. In Tzu Chi, they participate in both the religious and social-humanistic domains. There are two sub-categories, Group 2A and 2B which I will elaborate in the following sections.

For Group 2A members, they combine Tzu Chi with other forms of Chinese religion or Buddhist traditions.⁶⁶ My informants interpret such practices as

⁶⁶ The discourse on religious identity and Buddhism shall be extrapolated in Chapter 4 when I discuss about the nature of Buddhism in Singapore.

synonymous and consider themselves as “Buddhist”. One of the Tzu Chi members describes his religious experience:

I pray to Taoist deities, Buddha and also a member of the Taoist Federation in Singapore. Taoism and Buddhism is important in his life because the worship of deities brought blessings for my family, prosperity and wealth in my business. At the same time, I go to Tzu Chi’s sharing sessions to learn more about the teachings of Buddha and show me how to be a wiser human who is able to learn about life through helping the needy. Sometimes, I do go for the prayer sessions with my friends to learn more about Buddhism. This is common. Many Buddhists in Singapore go to so many different temples. At Tzu Chi, we can even join the recycling activities and my family can bond together and we build new friendships with other Tzu Chi members. (Mr Yap, 58, Chinese-Buddhist)

For Buddhists like Mr Yap, their polytheistic practices and religious identity as Tzu Chi Buddhists does not conflict with other religious behaviour. Many Tzu Chi members continue to pray at Chinese, Thai, Burmese or Indian Buddhist temples and worship the gods and deities from these temples. Some of them also engage in ancestral worship, praying with joss sticks, burning incense paper and membership in other Buddhist affiliations.

Tzu Chi teaches Buddhists about Engaged Buddhism. In a disciplined and orderly organization, members can choose the type of activities they wish to join and continue to be members in other Buddhist, Taoists or even non-Buddhist groups. We learn about the social environment and how we can help through practical ways and practice religion. Yet, we can do what we have always been doing, like going to other temples or placing our ancestral tablet on the altar at home. We are all Buddhist (Jasmine, 43, Chinese-Taoist)

When Mr Yap and Jasmine were asked if they would consider themselves to be a Buddhist or Taoist, both claim that they are not particularly bothered about the religious labels. To them, the religions are unique but they have similar teachings and people believe in a religion because they “need something or are looking for something in life”. Many of my informants claim that the term “Buddhist” is a generic

description for the different strands of Buddhist or Chinese religions that is closely associated with Buddhism.

In Group 2A, the members' current religious practices have a close affinity and association with Buddhism. Other than Chinese-Buddhist practices, even Hinduism is considered as relatable to Buddhism.

There are a few Hindus who are members here. We also pray to Buddha. Hinduism has many Gods and a lot of us go to Chinese temples too. We are free to choose what we want to join. I still go for my temple activities, attend Dhamma class and help at the education classes at Tzu Chi. (Gopal, 36, Indian-Hindu)

Several Hindu members expressed that their Hindu practices complement those of Tzu Chi. Like Gopal, they feel that Hinduism consists of certain Buddhistic elements and the temple-visiting practice for Hindus also includes visiting Chinese Buddhist temples. Thus, Group 2A members are able to participate actively in both religious and social-humanistic domains in Tzu Chi. As they participate in religious activities; they find that it is complementary and related to their beliefs in a Buddhist tradition. For them, the social-humanistic aspects allow them to understand Buddhism better and offer opportunities for them to practice religious values and teachings which will bring about positive effects for those whom they help.

The other sub-category, Group 2B, consists of members who combine Tzu Chi with non-Buddhist traditions like Catholicism or Christianity. In these exclusive religious traditions, the Church does not sanction portfolio diversification practices (Iannaccone, 1995) since these religions are monotheistic and syncretic practices are not encouraged. One would be alarmed that a Christian or Catholic is a member of a Buddhist organization. In my fieldwork, it was unexpected when I discovered Group 2B members who do not mind attending Tzu Chi religious activities.

It used to be a little odd when I first joined Tzu Chi. I was uncertain at some points and questioned what was happening. How can a Christian be in a Buddhist group? What would my Church friends say? Will the Tzu Chi members convert me into Buddhism? My worries were unfounded when I realised I could still be a Christian and attend Church and I join Tzu Chi, cooperate and share a common vision with the volunteers. I would even join them for their religious sessions because I value their religious beliefs too even if I choose not to practice Buddhism. (Benjamin, 27, Chinese-Christian)

My informants explained their actions by explaining their perceptions about strands of commonality in religious teachings and religious identity that would increase one's receptiveness to other religious teachings or participation.

“Although I am a Christian and of course I believe in Jesus if you ask me. I attend Bible classes since I was in secondary school. But, there is no real problem even if I were to attend the monthly ritual at Tzu Chi branch. I guess for me, I must confess that the teachings of Master are very real issues that anyone can relate to. Even if I am a Christian, it does not mean I should reject anything else beyond Christianity. Regardless of religious teachings, I guess the message is the same. For the betterment of mankind, to love, share and be wise. Initially, I felt it might be strange. But since I am already a Tzu Chi member, I think there is really no harm just learning more. Sometimes, it's just a name. Some people call themselves Christian but totally do not act as one. Or I could be a Buddhist but I still attend other activities. In Tzu Chi, I agree with much of what my Buddhists friends say or try to teach. And sometimes, I just smile and think to myself. Maybe I just have a Christian interpretation to that message. Ultimately, if you manage things well, there's really no reason why one cannot be members in different groups.” (Anne, 47, Indian-Christian)

In looking for complementary practices as one alternate different religious organization, religious customisation offers choices to concurrently have several religious memberships. The religious behaviour and religiosity of Group 2B is managed using the dual-sphere framework where members select the nature of involvement and decide the degree of alternation. My informants who are Group 2B-Christians join Tzu Chi but maintain a Christian identity. Although their religious behavior is polytheistic in nature, they only worship one religious figure but respect the idea that there are other religious authority and figures. They participate in social

events in Tzu Chi but attend religious activities out of respect and acceptance of a non-Christian faith. Many Group 2B members compartmentalise their alternating identities and see themselves as distinctly as Christians at church or Tzu Chi-Christian at branch events or religious activities.⁶⁷

(iii) Group 3 – Social

Tzu Chi's dual-sphere framework has a variety of activities ranging from religious to social-humanistic. Its inclusive membership even extends to non-Buddhists who wish to participate only in the social domain of Tzu Chi. One of the informants from Group 3 is a middle-age lady, professed to be a Catholic who is born into the religion and has been going to Novena Church. Coming from a family of staunch Catholics, she will not consider conversion into another religion.

I volunteer at free clinic sessions on Sundays and blood donation drives. I also joined the Tzu Chi international aid team which was planning the Tsunami relief project. I hope to help as many patients and needy as I can. Just like in my job too. I am using skills I have to benefit others wherever and whenever. Although I am a Catholic and I do not practice the Buddhist faith, there is nothing wrong for me to when I am in Tzu Chi. If there are members who tell me about Buddhism, I will listen but I am clear that Catholicism has guided me in life all this while. Although there are some Buddhist activities, it is up to me whether I choose to participate but I have not done so. In fact, you probably won't believe this but there are some Catholic friends in Tzu Chi who attend the religious ceremonies. For them, attending the religious activities is probably out of respect or sometimes friendship ties or it could be just another learning class. At the end of the day, they can decide whether to kneel or make prayers. Whether they choose to then convert into Buddhism or do not mind mixing the religious acts together, it is up to them! No one really tells you what you can or cannot, there are religious rules or conduct but

⁶⁷ To maintain their current religiosity, they alternate from existing Christian / Catholic systems to becoming a Tzu Chi member. In attending Tzu Chi's religious activities, whether these members actually incorporate Buddhism, consciously or unconsciously into their lives, whether Buddhism has become part of their religiosity or if they believe in Buddha are sociologically interesting. This presents a new discussion on polytheism and the worship of multiple Gods. However, this dimension is beyond the scope of this thesis which is to discuss different categories of alternation and examine the consequences of religious alternation on one's religiosity.

things can be altered and eventually, religion is a very personal issue. For Tzu Chi prayers, some attend because of their friends while others just see it as a spiritual and blessing during the ceremonies. For me, I have not attended because I see it as another set of religious values different from mine. (Ms Lum, 37, Chinese-Catholic)

Group 3 members like Ms Lum are very strict about their religious belief systems and will not consider converting to Buddhism or practicing any Buddhist rituals. These members are only involved in the social events at Tzu Chi. Religious alternation is vital to understand how this group switches their participation without affecting their religiosity and make sense of their participation in different organizations. According to my informants, they view themselves as Tzu Chi volunteers and do not wish to be associated with religious classes or activities.

Another interesting finding would be a significant portion of these members who volunteer in the medical mission and free clinics are medical professionals. Many of them are introduced by friends or colleagues into Tzu Chi and they rationalize their participation by aligning it with their professional duty in the medical field. Similarly, this informant attributes her nursing profession as an impetus and her colleagues who motivated her participation in Tzu Chi. Another category of Group 3 members are non-Buddhists who received assistance from Tzu Chi. For instance, there are a few Muslim families who received medical support and welfare assistance from Tzu Chi volunteers.

When I was out of job after my accident, I could not feed my entire family. Tzu Chi volunteers were kind and helped me. I should help others now that I can. (Zubaidah, 38, Malay-Muslim)

These recipients hope to participate in some volunteer work because they feel grateful for the assistance which Tzu Chi rendered and want to contribute in return. For these non-Buddhists, they participate only in the social events in Tzu Chi and do not attend any religious events to avoid any confusion of their religious identity.

Many of my Group 3 informants alternate between Tzu Chi, a Buddhist group, and their non-Buddhist affiliation. They interpret their religion and social participation at Tzu Chi as distinct spheres and perceive their Tzu Chi membership as purely social. My informants expressed that their religious faith is considered monotheistic and any religious diversification practices are usually practiced in private (Iannaccone, 1995) since such behaviour are less tolerated or socially accepted. In some religions, there are strong sanctions in religious doctrines or leaders who forbid or discourage the worship of other religious figures and teachings which poses barriers to ensure unitary exclusive membership in a single religious organization. For the Catholics, Christian or Muslim Tzu Chi members, they are aware of such sanctions in within their Church or cell groups of religious institutions that are strict monotheist firms which demarcate religious membership boundaries clearly.

The alternating identity allows them to participate in Tzu Chi social-humanistic activities without converting to Buddhism. While they subscribe to a set of non-Buddhist religious beliefs, these religionists recognize the different religious faith as distinct and do not assimilate the practices. They can mediate the strict rules, group boundary and social policing about religious identity, worship in a monotheistic religious group and incorporate a social membership from another organization. These Tzu Chi members can compartmentalize their religiosity and alternate between the different systems and eliminate any possible existence of cognitive dissonance.

3.4 Multi-religious and multi-ethnic membership

Having described the three types of Tzu Chi membership, (i) Religious, (ii) Religious/ Social and (iii) Social and how converts actually alternate between different religious systems. It is clear that Tzu Chi's membership consists of members

from different religious and ethnic groups. How is it possible for a Chinese-Buddhist group to accept members of other ethnic or religious groups? What are the implications on one's religious identity and the state's attempt to delineate religious boundaries? Although it is not within the aims of this thesis to explore the ethnicity patterns and membership in Tzu Chi, I must devote this section for a brief analysis on the dynamics of ethnicity in a Buddhist group which has a predominant Chinese membership.

In the religious marketplace, religious firms aim to convert members and produce Group 1 members to ensure the single religious plans and distinct religious affiliations which maintain clear boundaries from other organizations. In the Singapore state, religious or ethnic profiling of its citizens classifies citizens into specific categories. However, religious customisation and alternation would mean that Tzu Chi's membership is open to everyone. Also, a dual-sphere framework allows a multi-religious or multi-ethnic membership in the organization where members are offered a customized religious experience to shape their religiosity based on their needs and demands. In the interviews, many of my informants who are non-Buddhists or non-Chinese expressed that their participation in the social-humanistic domains of Tzu Chi is not contradictory to their religious beliefs or ethnicity.

Who says this is a Chinese group? You go to Chinese temples, you see many Indonesians, Indians, Japanese or even Caucasians. Nowadays, a religion has people of different race or nationality. Not like in the past, we think only Chinese are Buddhists. For me, I go to the Hindu temple but I love to do charity in Tzu Chi. I even attend the religious classes to learn Buddhism. We are allowed to do that in Tzu Chi though I am not a Buddhist. (Joe, 42, Indian, Hindu)

The multi-religious or multi-ethnic membership has minimal contradiction to the organizational structure. In responding to how the state's categorisations of religious identity, Group 1 members who are focused on participating in Tzu Chi's

religious domain to learn Tzu Chi Buddhism are clearly identified as Buddhists. Group 2 or 3 members' can choose their religious identity based on what they perceive of the religious affiliations which they associate themselves with. Although religious labels are functional to describe one's religiosity, the degree of alternation in Tzu Chi demonstrates how members' alternating identities and customised practices create ambivalence. Indeed, religious identity or labels are actually concepts that are fluid and changeable. For instance, Joe is classified as a Hindu but he feels that he incorporates aspects of Buddhism and learns about Buddhist teachings and being labelled as a Hindu in his birth certificate does not mean that he is restricted from participating in other religious groups. The religious and social-humanistic aspects in Tzu Chi can indirectly become a vehicle to promote Buddhism simply by providing an opportunity for non-Buddhists to explore and comprehend the teachings. For Group 2 or 3 members, the religious alternation can introduce non-Buddhists into the practices and teachings of Buddhism.

Tzu Chi has members of so many different religious. You meet Buddhists, Taoists and even Christians or Catholics. In fact, even Muslims do come by to volunteer sometimes. The fact that members need not convert and can choose what they like freely is important. Initially, the decision to come and interact in a "Buddhist" group can make one hesitate. But, the desire to help, volunteer, do charity and just hang out to find out can change your views. I am so glad that religion or race doesn't matter. Anyone can be a Tzu Chi volunteer. Singapore is a multi-racial society and everyone is welcomed to do their bit for our community. (Karen, 25, Indian-Christian)

Unlike religious firms that aim to teach its members a specific doctrine or convert believers into a full-fledged Group 1 member, Tzu Chi provides the customization experience so that it accommodates Group 2 and 3 members who also wish to participate in certain religious or social-community activities selectively. Individuals are not bounded by the boundaries of religious or ethnic labels and their threshold to combine religious practices surpasses any rhetoric of religious harmony

and tolerance as they embrace a unique blend of practices. This exhibits a different form of co-existence which goes beyond the basic level of state-regulated religious harmony and tolerance.

I did not feel that coming to Tzu Chi or joining it would reflect that I am a Buddhist. It's like inviting friends to Church doesn't mean they want to be Christians. Since Tzu Chi has so many volunteer opportunities, it was something I wanted to join and I came to find out more. It is perfect that I can be a Christian yet no one will convert me here. (Huimin, 21, Chinese-Christian)

Many of my non-Buddhists informants expressed that they did not think of joining a religious group. They attribute their religious alternation to their altruism and aspiration to support a group which deals with social issues and provides opportunities for members' direct involvement. Although there are many Buddhists in the group, they do not feel out of place since there are many members who practice other religions. Most importantly, there was no pressure to convert into Buddhism and these non-Buddhists feel that they can continue to participate at ease. In a multi-ethnic society, the different ethnic groups co-exist in a plural society. Thus, it is possible for non-Chinese to participate in any social or community events. As the Malays and Indians informants highlighted in the interviews, going to Tzu Chi is like joining a neighbourhood event. It is not unusual for different ethnic groups to mingle in social settings. They feel that charity events and the humanitarian vision are meaningful and important activities that can help enrich their lives.

The co-existence of members of different ethnicity, religious faith and different types of religiosity in a Buddhist organization is possible through the dual-sphere framework. The multi-religious and multi-ethnic membership profile reveal diverse forms of religiosity and a range of alternating practices in Tzu Chi. Religious customization and alternation can occur so that various religious forms and practices

develop as members mix and match from the variety of religious practices, doctrines, ideology, beliefs or rituals which are meaningful and relevant to the worldview of an individual. As members customize their religious and social needs from various religious firms, they alternate between the systems and varied identities develop. Different degree and types of religious alternation are formed based on the combinations of religious and social-humanistic involvement from Tzu Chi membership.

3.5 Re-thinking “conversion” and religiosity

One of the more interesting aspects of religion in Singapore is the changing membership in religious groups due to conversion process. In Singapore, religious affiliations are closely tied to ethnicity and the ethnic angle in religious conversion plays out. Effectively, this results in the perception that there is no difference between the notions of ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ (Chua, 1996: 57). As noted earlier⁶⁸, almost all Malays are Muslims. Similarly, almost all adherents of Hinduism are Indians. Islam is seen as a Malay religion and Hinduism, an Indian religion. Chinese with “Chinese Religion”⁶⁹, treated as an indistinguishable blend of Buddhist and Taoist practice, and the State supports specific “doctrinal” forms of Buddhism and Hinduism whereby the uncontrolled plurality of religious systems is potentially disruptive to nation-building and modernization (Wee, 1976; Sinha, 1999). Each race is today closely associated with a particular religion with the exception of Christianity, often associated with the Europeans, Anglo-Saxon category, now commonly known as the ambiguous category of “Others”. It is however common to see many in the Chinese (16.5%) and Indian (12.1%) communities in Singapore adhering to Christianity, although only 14.6% of

⁶⁸ See review on Religion and State in Chapter 1.

⁶⁹ For a more in-depth review of the study of Chinese Religions in Singapore, see Tong (1989, 2002).

the total population adhere to the religion. (Source: Singapore Census of Population, 2000). Ideas of ethnicity and religion are reproduced as ethnic-cultural identities and these perceptions have an impact on the nature of religious conversion in Tzu Chi.

In Tzu Chi, a Buddhist organization, membership is not limited to Buddhists or Chinese only but includes members from other religious or ethnic groups. Since religious groups are different and unique in their teachings and practices, religious alternation has meant that non-Buddhists or non-Chinese can join Tzu Chi and maintain their prior affiliations. In my attempt to unravel this conundrum, the success and popularity in attracting a multi-religious and multi-ethnic membership demonstrates that alternation is an important conceptual tool to make sense of religious change in Singapore. In Tzu Chi, the socio-religious identity as a result of alternation is in turn internalized and expressed as mutual tolerance and understanding in co-existing with communities of different religions and ethnic types.

In the sociological literature, one perspective of conversion theories refers to a change of belief and personal identity (Balch, 1980). Conversion to another religion implies a transformation of identity or orientation in behavioural and cognitive referents. Apart from the shifts in personalities which have been observed as a result of change in religious identity, Snow and Machalek (1984) suggests a conscious shift in one's sense of grounding. The displacement of one's universe of discourse by another or the ascendancy of a formerly peripheral universe of discourse to the status of primary authority would mean a change in the religiosity, belief systems, membership as a result of conversion into a another religion.

Despite the contributions of the contemporary paradigm, a closer analysis reveals a number of inherent limitations. Most of these studies were conducted in the West and cannot be used to account for global phenomenon or representative of all

religious groups. Furthermore, conversion should be seen as a process rather than as an instantaneous event which leads to a formation of new self that is separate and distinct from the previous identity. In doing so, I have suggested in this thesis, that religious alternation can account for the developments and changes which result from combining different religious affiliations and switching from one to the other. In a dual-sphere framework, the religious and social-humanistic sphere in Tzu Chi offers different activities and religious customization allows members to select their participation in a Buddhist organization. Thus, members can negotiate their Tzu Chi membership and alternate between different affiliations. As members are not required to convert into Buddhism to qualify for Tzu Chi membership, there are implications in understanding conversion, religiosity and affiliations.

In understanding the process of religious alternation, I suggest that conversion and alternation reflect different degree of religious switching. Religious alternation argues that individuals do not need to abandon their prior religious identity, affiliation or practices or undergo a complete change. Rather, individuals can juggle several religious affiliations and straddle participation in different religious organizations. Religious customisation and a dual-sphere structure in Tzu Chi allow these members to participate in the social-humanistic activities and alternate between different religious groups. They are not expected to discard any prior religiosity and pledge full commitment to one religious organization. This would mean that religiosity or religious identity cannot be understood or defined simply based on group membership. Religiosity, based on one's level of commitment, contribution to a religious organization or subscription to a particular set of religious beliefs, and affiliation should not be interpreted as static definitions that are always correlated. Since members are alternating between different religious groups, we cannot ascertain their

religious faith or identity based on membership. Tzu Chi promotes Buddhist religiosity yet it does not aim to produce a hegemonic form of dogma but rather, Tzu Chi's Buddhists is possibly one of several kinds, an accommodating and liberal type, of label to make sense of the Buddhist identity and religiosity in a Buddhist organization.

Given the variety of experiences and diversity in the worldview of the informants, their insightful accounts conclude that there is no singular explanation for Tzu Chi conversion. There is an assortment of alternation patterns which explains different reasons and how an individual becomes attracted or introduced to the group. There is a possibility of a tendency to overemphasize the individuality of the convert, and one's capacity to influence the environment (Singer, 1995) reflects a lack of emphasis on the social environment of the potential convert. Thus, it is important to take into consideration the possible impact that external agents may have on the conversion process. I suggest a rigorous research should take into account explanations that actively involve both the convert and the social environment. Religious alternation and the various forms of membership in Tzu Chi present a new paradigm in conversion research which allows an insightful analysis of conversion experiences in an organization with a dual-sphere framework. The phenomenon of conversion in Tzu Chi involves a multiplicity of factors which I have raised in this chapter. I shall proceed to analyse the structural conditions which also account for religious alternation and the popularity of Tzu Chi in the religious market. Chapter 4 shall discuss the organisational structure, efficiency and outreach programme of Tzu Chi. What is the Tzu Chi community like? What makes Tzu Chi appeal and membership sustainable?

Chapter 4

The community within and competition beyond

In Chapter 3, I have explained how Tzu Chi fulfils two functions; social-humanistic and religious where members can select different levels of participation. A dual-sphere framework has a wide range of activities and individuals are able to experience religious customisation. In this chapter, I will extend my argument to examine the structural factors of Tzu Chi which facilitate and promote religious alternation for Buddhists and non-Buddhist members.

The structural factors can be broadly classified into internal and external factors. I shall examine the organizational structure and outreach programme in Tzu Chi which make it a successful and popular organization. I will show how the organizational structures and culture in Tzu Chi create a community of shared purpose, Tzu Chi's outreach programmes and its ability to attract and sustain membership. Next, I will examine the social, contextual factors to understand how the religious landscape in Singapore and how Tzu Chi can fit into Singapore society.

4.1 Tzu Chi's organizational niche

The success and popularity of Tzu Chi can be explained by certain organizational features and the way Tzu Chi is structured. It can function efficiently and has an effective system of proselytisation to reach out to new converts. The high degree of social solidarity among Tzu Chi members can be explained by examining its structure which sets up a system that ensures a community of shared purpose and solidarity.

4.1.1 Examining the organizational structure

The appeal of Tzu Chi as a big and well-established organisation which provides religious or social-humanistic activities is an important factor which attracts and sustains membership. Members are able to participate in wide range of talks, courses and programmes in the group which are planned in a structured and organised manner.

I am sure there will be something for everyone. The 4 missions have so many things that one can do and possibly be interested in. As we discover how we can help others, lead a more fulfilling life, many of us also become close friends as we grow together in Tzu Chi. (Mrs Tan, 38, Chinese-Buddhist)

They feel that these charity, educational or medical-related activities allowed them to find satisfaction and meaning in life. For instance, those who wish to perform charitable acts or achieve self-fulfillment in life would find that Tzu Chi's activities provided avenues for them to seek these aims. Through their participation, they also forged social networks. My informants expressed that the excellent planning and administration in Tzu Chi made it possible to organize events fulfill emotional, intellectual and social needs of its members.

In the organizational chart of Tzu Chi (**Figure 1**), it is evident that Tzu Chi has a highly structured and bureaucratic organizational structure. The modern and practical management style and structure distinguish Tzu Chi from typical religious institutions which focus on religious activities, practices, operated by religious leaders, receive advice or direct involvement from ordained monks, nuns, priests or religious specialists. Cheng Yen, the founder and head of Tzu Chi is the only ordained individual in Tzu Chi who neither has disciples nor an ordained monkhood. The organization is run by lay members and employees with a Chief Executive Officer

heading a region. Mr David Liu, the CEO of Singapore Tzu Chi has been spearheading the Foundation's development since 2003.

Tzu Chi's dual-sphere framework promotes four missions; Charity, Medicine, Education and Humanitarian. In teaching social-humanistic values and fulfilling secular functions of a community or charity organization, Tzu Chi is structured and managed differently from a Taoist or Buddhist temple.

Tzu Chi is a Buddhist organization. Yet, it is somewhat like a social, community group also. It is not like a temple. Somehow, it is like a social group, like a charity organization. You do not see monks or nuns in robes who organise the events. Many people are volunteers. They become members of Tzu Chi. Even non-Buddhists can join Tzu Chi too. (Wei Tao, 23, Chinese-Buddhist)

Although it is a religious establishment which provides social welfare and public services, its administrative structure and advising committee consist of lay people who are employees or volunteers in the organization and who steer the organization's activities. The administrative centre and committee to propose and execute Tzu Chi missions function like a charitable or philanthropic organization.

I must say that I am amazed by the efficiency and management in Tzu Chi. Everything is very clearly laid out. If we want to organize or participate in anything, the HQ office will direct you and give clear instructions. Things are well-organised. Events are always well-received. Volunteers will be informed and very soon, you will get more than enough numbers for each event. (Melissa, 19, Chinese-Catholic)

The management committee and members participate in different groups to help in the planning and running of activities. Some people join the Medical mission and organise things like overseas mission trips, disaster relief or Free clinics, health screenings and medical talks. In every small group, it is efficient and clear. Leaders, volunteers, secretary or treasurer who know their roles well, perform their responsibilities well. (Kokila, 47, Indian-Hindu)

The centralized administrative centre manages the activities of the Foundation with the aim to promote Tzu Chi missions. Under the administrative body, it has features of a modern corporation; management committee, hierarchical positions and

sub-committees to oversee the different arms in Tzu Chi. Many of my informants suggest that they are impressed with the speed, efficiency and clarity of work procedures of the management. They feel that this facilitates clear communication and understanding of what the group offers. Its well-organised and proficient system will allow members to participate and reach out to more people through various activity channels. Members can also be mobilised quickly in urgent situations when manpower is needed for Tzu Chi home visits or mobile health screenings when there is a great demand for services by members of the public.

In any overseas branches, Tzu Chi's missions and structure are standardised and its missions are the fundamental aims of any overseas Tzu Chi establishment. Unlike Tzu Chi Taiwan, overseas chapters might face limited resources or institutional barriers which inhibit possibilities to build a Tzu Chi University, Hospital or set up a media channel. Nevertheless, initiatives which are suitable for the local context will be introduced.

4.1.2 Tzu Chi's outreach programme

With an efficient structured infrastructure, how are individuals introduced and assimilated into Tzu Chi? In any organization, it is important to have a successful outreach programme to attract and sustain membership which is vital to the organization's growth. The theory that NRMs provide experiences analogous to those found in traditional rites of passage has been convincingly argued by a number of scholars. As Melton and Moore (1982:46) wrote, "the phenomenon of the 'cult experience' ... must be seen within the context of states of transition – particularly the transition from adolescence to young adulthood." Turner (1968) pointed to the hippie movement, and Levine (1984) to "radical groups" as fulfilling a function similar to

traditional rites of passage. Prince (1974) pursued a similar line of argument, but adopted the metaphor of “cocoon work” suggesting a process of psychological healing and maturation. These perspectives often highlight the individual’s experience of transformation emphasizing on the psychological or physiological changes from the participant’s worldview. I suggest that changes are contextualised within a social or cultural setting and situational factors should also be accounted for.

Using the metaphor of a social cocoon in Tzu Chi, the continued reinforcement of religion over time can provide a change in lifestyle intended to meet religious and non-religious needs of its members and potential converts. In the fieldwork, I found that converts usually first come into contact with Tzu Chi by word of mouth from their colleagues, friends, relatives who are participants in Tzu Chi events. Many of my informants expressed that the large scale communal activities at Tzu Chi not only provided the opportunities for people to achieve a sense of self-fulfilment and expand their social networks. Members could tap on the resources in Tzu Chi to cultivate their needs.

Given the selection of activities at Tzu Chi, it was easy to invite friends, colleagues, relatives to attend. Some of the popular events are the Charity bazaar, New Year Celebration, Home visits or recycling activities. These are considered “neutral activities” which does not highlight any religious connotation and minimises any religious sensitivities. So, non-Buddhists will feel less pressure to attend. That was how I started too. (Francis, 42, Chinese-Christian)

When I first came, I was worried. I know I am not going to be a Buddhist. My parents will kill me for that. But I thought, no harm doing charity right. I am not here to be a Buddhist but just to volunteer myself. (Bhavani, 24, Indian-Hindu)

My informants described their early encounters with the group during the initial stage where many started to know of Tzu Chi by word-of-mouth and visit Tzu Chi through a member’s invitation. There array of activities encourages members to invite

their friends to participate. In a dual-sphere framework, opportunities for Tzu Chi members to introduce their friends, relatives or colleagues to the group are maximised. In promoting the social-humanistic values and doing charitable acts to benefit the society, non-Buddhists are willing to participate in these events. Furthermore, they did not have to worry about the pressures of conversion into a new religion.

During this initial Tzu Chi encounter, these potential converts are surrounded by a group of “warm hearted and kind” volunteers which evolves into a friendship invitation. I suggest that this process of gradual proselytisation can be termed a “social cocooning” process to understand the relationships and interactions within the Tzu Chi community. The models of a social cocoon (Palmer, 1993) and social encapsulation (Greil and Rudy, 1984) have been used to explain conversion. Palmer’s study on female participation in new religious movements argues that NRM provides a protective and supportive micro-society for women. In this social environment, women are able to experiment with a broad array of social roles beyond those of their institutionalised and stereotypical roles demanded by society. Greil and Rudy who analysed Identity Transformation Organizations, suggest that the group provides physical, social and ideological encapsulation of its members which plays an important role in the creation and reconstruction of individual identities. Similarly, the channel to create such a change would be through Tzu Chi’s outreach programmes, a social cocooning process, in a social environment which encapsulates the individual.

I remember the welcoming atmosphere and homely ambience. They were all so kind and generous. Very selfless qualities! It was attractive for a new comer to continue visiting Tzu Chi. (Serene, 49, Chinese-Catholic)

Somehow, you get surrounded by kind, gentle, caring people. The members are not just treating the new comers in a different manner. Just look at how they talk to one another, the way they behave and are

mindful of the way they present their mannerisms. (Fadhli, 36, Malay-Muslim)

As my informants recount their interactions with Tzu Chi members, the “cocooning” experiences are initially perceived to be exhibited through traits such as unusual kindness and warmth. A unanimous quality which converts used to describe the Tzu Chi members was their unselfish generosity. All the converts spoke of how they were offered help and assistance from Tzu Chi members. From minute gestures like exchanging greetings or daunting tasks which required time and effort to help, it is undisputable that all the converts felt that the care and friendship they received in Tzu Chi was remarkable. Tzu Chi’s way of caring for a new member individually enhances positive feelings towards the group. At the same time, the Tzu Chi members display a humble attitude towards the people they help and this will facilitate communication and interaction between Tzu Chi members and the converts. Many of my informants suggested that the friendship invitations also meant that potential converts would return for activities.

It took me awhile after a few volunteer sessions. After several interactions, sustained participation and friendship invitations, converts slowly became convinced that they were joining the right group of people who are keen to nurture good character, discipline and enrich their lives with knowledge and wisdom. (Joshua, 40, Indian-Christian)

Most people start off as volunteers who help in Tzu Chi activities on an informal basis. Volunteers usually participate in the group for a period of time before they express interest to become a formal member. At this stage, the convert is beginning to become engulfed within the cocoon. They become impressed by Tzu Chi’s distinct culture and the quality of members who strictly observe proper countenance, conduct, speech and deportment. The converts also make an effort to

follow the Tzu Chi culture aimed at creating a noble demeanour achievable through cultivation and patience. Cheng Yen teaches that one has to pay attention to one's actions and this even applies to how people walk, stand, sit and lie down. In practicing the proper conduct, the members believe that they will undergo self realization and their exemplary manner can create a positive influence.⁷⁰

Our Master sees the potential for social reform originating from every individual. In Tzu Chi, she teaches the members must first set a good example and correct their behaviour and be proper. Only then will they have the power to educate and reform all living beings. The only way to reform and influence a person is to have a proper conduct and sincerity. (Rachel, 22, Chinese-Buddhist)

My informants also discussed that principles of integrity must be adhered to and members must possess a tolerant and benevolent attitude in their interaction with others. As suggested by them, a Tzu Chi member who can cultivate a good moral character creates good and loving relations with others.

Tzu Chi's recruitment is generally through established members. Previous research on other religious groups like Soka Gakkai or The Unification Church (Wilson and Dobbelaere, 1994:59, 1987:186 and Barker, 1989:27) also shed light on the significance of "person-to-person" contact as an important means to introduce people to the group. Members of the public encounter Tzu Chi through their relatives, friends, colleagues or classmates. When a volunteer is certain of joining Tzu Chi, he will undergo training to understand the complex and broad structural framework and activities in Tzu Chi. In the process, Tzu Chi converts are able to achieve a sense of purpose when they abide by Tzu Chi principles and teachings. When converts desire to follow the practices of Tzu Chi members and express keen interest in the group's

⁷⁰ This idea shall be extrapolated in the later section on Tzu Chi ethos.

activities, the social cocooning has been successful and this marks the start of their membership into the group.

To increase public awareness of the foundation and create learning opportunities about the ideology and religious teachings of Tzu Chi, the branch office has launched many initiatives. For instance, participation in Annual World Book Fair, translation of Tzu Chi publications into English for the local English literates and the launch of Jingsi Books & Café 静思书轩 as a retail outlet are avenues to promote its publication. Tzu Chi aims to spread its culture and Master Cheng Yen's humanitarian ideology and at gatherings in the café, talks or discussions to learn more about Tzu Chi. With these opportunities to reach out to people, these neutral grounds for interaction does not outwardly propagate Buddhism or religious ideology in Tzu Chi but subtly promote the activities and practices of Tzu Chi so that one may start to establish contact with the group, begin to participate as a newcomer and accept the Tzu Chi membership eventually.

4.1.3 Creating a community of shared purpose

When a new member decides to join the group, they will start to undergo workshops and trainings to become a volunteer. Some are required to attend classes to be equipped with certain conversational and interaction skills to prepare one for volunteer work at the Institute of Mental Health or interviews at home visits.

During training, volunteers are dressed in grey polo-tee shirts and white trousers. After we graduate from the training and become full-fledged Tzu Chi members, we are designated as 会员 “commissioners” (huiyuan). We will be given a full set of uniform, consisting of the navy blue polo tee, white trousers and Tzu Chi belt. Youth members receive the same set of uniform except that their polo tee is sky blue colour. (Xing Yong, 21, Chinese-Buddhist)

The Tzu Chi uniform⁷¹ provides a sense of identity and belonging for its members. In my interview, Tzu Chi members exhibit a high degree of respect and pride for their uniform. To them, it signifies their membership and a commitment to be part of the group and promote its missions. They feel that wearing a uniform connotes special significance and reminds them of their pledge towards an active participation to constantly put their knowledge and skills into the promotion of Tzu Chi's missions. Becoming a member in Tzu Chi entails sharing a common sense of purpose to serve society and promote humanity. My informants emphasized that humanitarian goals is a social gel and strong binding force which motivates their participation.

We are all responsible members. Once we receive the uniforms and decide to be part of the organization, we are seen as equals. We all hope to cultivate ourselves, enrich our lives and strive towards promoting Tzu Chi missions. The humanitarian society belongs to everyone. So, whether one is a Buddhist or not, it doesn't matter because our aims are unified. (Huimin, 21, Chinese-Christian)

The significance of the Tzu Chi uniform which creates a community of shared purpose accounts for the high level of social solidarity which binds multi-religious and multi-ethnic members. Members are focused on promoting the social-humanistic values taught in Tzu Chi and aim to promote the humanitarian concerns. According to my informants, they believe that improvements in lives can be achieved through Tzu Chi activities.

Within the Tzu Chi community, membership does not rigidly confine its members into neat categories. Rather, there can be an overlap between membership categories or participation. For instance, commissioners (members) and Honorary

⁷¹ Tzu Chi volunteers are donned in grey polo tees and white trousers. Members are in navy-blue polo tees, with a white colour trimming and white trousers with Tzu Chi belt. Tzu Chi youth are in sky-blue polo tees, with Tzu Chi trousers. For formal events, leaders will have another set of attire. The males wear shirts with navy blue trousers and a navy blue tie. Females will have a navy colour Chinese dress with mandarin collar.

Patrons (members who donate a significant monetary amount) can be interchangeable labels to describe volunteers who donate a considerable sum to Tzu Chi on a monthly basis. Also, Tzu Chi Mamas who are regular teachers at Educational classes can also be Tzu Chi members or volunteers who also participate in Free Clinics or Flower Arrangement classes.

Tzu Chi is a big family and everyone is free to participate in anything. Some people only go for religious classes. Others volunteer at home visits and go on overseas clinics to Batam. My friend is a teacher at the Youth classes but she cooks regularly at our bazaars. You will not be restricted to particular duties. In fact, there are so many that it is ideal if you can join more and learn more too. (Annie, 64, Chinese-Taoist)

In my study, I found out that Tzu Chi members belong to different groups based on interest, activity, participation in Tzu Chi or even age. Members are generally classified by their residential zones; North, South, East, West, North-east, North-west, South-east, South-west and central. These categories of zoning and allocation allow members to interact conveniently when they wish to promote certain events together. The convenience of residing in the same zone would facilitate meetings and regular meetings. As my informants described:

I guess it is easy for people who are in the same neighbourhood to meet and a lot of them become so close that they travel together when coming to the HQ at Pasir Ris. Some even form regular meetings and want to join activities together. My close friend in Tzu Chi actually lives in the same block. We get along so well that whatever she joins, she will ask me to go along too. (Sharon, 36, Chinese-Taoist)

These groups are vital to the promotion of Tzu Chi's missions. It demonstrates the effectiveness of the social cocoon which encapsulates an individual. Within a tight-knitted community, group activities are impetus to attract and captivate the interest and enthusiasm of members. The multiple-memberships in various groups mean multiple identities for member. Given flexibility and choice to select one's participation and customise their involvement, my informants juggle several

responsibilities in various groups. Many informants mentioned that these are opportunities to interact with a group of like-minded individuals. They value the friendships, group relations and social ties that are built based on the common goals they have.

With good company, you somehow will continue attending the activities and your friends might encourage you or influence you to go for certain things together. The committee hopes that this will create a network and support for its members. They can share and help one another too. We belong to Tzu Chi and should do our duties with pride. Afterall, we are Tzu Chi ren (慈济人). (Kokila, 47, Indian-Hindu)

At the same time, the inter-locking groups and overlapping membership represent a reticulated structure which provides a form of social control. Leaders or committee members can manage the small groups by monitoring the members' participation, encourage continual participation and sustain one's involvement. Group membership increases the cohesiveness, solidarity, strengthens the community and their sense of purpose and identity. The group structure ensures strong social ties in the community and will contribute to the success of Tzu Chi in attracting the new and sustaining current membership. It represents how the social cocoon in Tzu Chi is successful and members who are assigned to roles and responsibilities can sustain their participation and long term commitment to the group.

4.1.4 Receiving and Giving

Many informants emphasized that they experienced a positive change in their lives. Some felt that they started to have a more rewarding and meaningful life while others described the ability to develop a healthy lifestyle and good moral character. For some informants, they recall that their initial introduction to the Movement was done by their relatives whose lives had changed drastically after joining Tzu Chi.

They also hear stories of contented individuals who find a purposeful life from their participation in Tzu Chi.

My child used to be like those teenagers who love to roam the streets after school. I'm a working parent and it is quite impossible to monitor my teenage son all round the clock. I am grateful that I came to Tzu Chi. It has enriched the lives of my family members. For me, I am able to find many meaningful activities to develop myself. But I am most happy about my child, he has been attending the teenagers' class and I think the values and friendships he gained really transformed him. It is not an overnight miracle. But, I think he starts to find a direction in life and I cannot express how happy I was when I realised how much his attitude has improved. I am so lucky that I learnt these important life values, respect, love, filial piety and hard work as a Tzu Chi teenager. I hope that we continue to cultivate ourselves. (Mdm Jana, Indian-Hindu, 46)

Indeed, the positive effects of participation are often cited by members as important reasons to continue in the group and the converts hope to achieve higher levels of self fulfillment. Duties will be assigned to people soon after they join and members believe that they will gain more when one contributes more. This ensures that the members will try their best to fulfill their duties – visiting poor families, investigating new cases, soliciting donations and taking turns to be a receptionist in the branch. The perceived enlargement of responsibilities and social sphere are also accompanied by a perception of change in themselves.

After becoming a Tzu Chi member for 2 years, I realise my life has changed significantly. I used to be very busy and led a hectic life without knowing how to balance it. Working life means sloughing your time away. When I first started, I was not sure if I could commit. I'm already such a busy person. I started with the home visits and eventually became part of the recycling team. The chance to work with other Tzu Chi members is fabulous I must say. It transformed the way I orientate my life and made me learn to understand what Master's teaching about great love is all about. It has been a fulfilling journey really and you will not know until you try it yourself. We play our small roles and everyone makes a big difference. So we do our parts to our best ability and these efforts will mean benefits for the needy. Honestly, I can say, I've become less self-centred and less workaholic. I work for a purpose now and I treasure the close ties and interactions with the Tzu Chi family. This is so different from what I was in the

past, selfish and just working for money. (Robert, Chinese-Buddhist, 34)

While some converts share how they enjoy the feelings of being more blessed and receiving blessings from Buddha, there are others who perceived effects such as being healed or blessed or simply developing good habits. These are the reasons that provided a sense of appeal which encouraged a continuing participation. Furthermore, the positive effects of participation are enduring to create long term relationship with the organization. These positive effects from participation were “gratifying” and it certainly outweighed any costs (e.g. time investment or long term commitment) and overcame initial barriers of resistance (skeptical views about the group or lack of interest).

It also indirectly creates a sense of appeal for the Tzu Chi convert, perceived to arise due to presumed effects on individual participants resulting from their participation. These presumed effects revolve largely around ideas of self-fulfillment which Heelas (1997: 2-3) has highlighted as an important aspect of the appeal of New Religious Movements and are important as a case which demonstrates how experience can alter perceived appeal. The large-scale activities not only provide opportunities for people to perform charity or achieve a sense of self-fulfillment but also network with other members. According to my informants, they felt grateful for the support and social networks within the group and they have a sense of achievement through plentiful opportunities to participate in charity and voluntary work. The structure of the organization, its teachings and sense of community can be reinforced and altered through practice.

From the different social and welfare contributions of members, Tzu Chi’s commitment in working towards the betterment of society is unquestionable. “In Taiwan, moreover, the scale of investment in temple building and in hospitals,

educational establishments and museums by lay Buddhist movements in modern times is unprecedented. What is also particularly striking about contemporary lay Buddhism in Taiwan is its strong commitment to active engagement in the social life of the country and on the international stage” (Clarke, 2006:325). Tzu Chi’s efforts transcend geographical boundaries and various projects in Singapore allow Tzu Chi to spread the seeds of “Great Love” (大爱) and “bring hope to the dark corners of society”. In Singapore, Tzu Chi’s projects have benefited many needy individuals and families in providing them social support and welfare provision. At the same time, members feel comfortable working together in an organization which has a structure set up to ensure a sense of community and solidarity. My informants highlighted that the sense of community is very strong and they appreciate the cooperative and team-building spirit shared in Tzu Chi. Tzu Chi members acknowledge that Tzu Chi provides a stable and efficient infrastructure for them to channel their energy and goodwill.

As members enjoy benefits from participation, they were also willing to give time, effort and money to the group. I have discussed how members perform multiple roles and duties which indirectly ensure a sustained involvement. Another form of contribution would be monetary gifts to the organization where one becomes a donor and pledge monetary donations.

It is a way for us to put our donations into good uses. The small sums of donations allow some converts to pay the membership subscriptions for their whole family. (Annie, 64, Chinese-Taoist)

When we do charity, some people will give time and energy. Others give money. I give all I can. When we donate to Tzu Chi, the funds are used to buy food and necessities for the needy, relief packs for disaster victims or subsidise medical care and purchase equipment or medicine for health checks. One can be generous to donate but Tzu Chi’s structure has a good system to ensure our money can help others. (Francis, 42, Chinese-Christian)

The significance of the monetary contributions is twofold. At one level, members interpret their act of donating as a means of performing charity, supporting the charity mission of Tzu Chi. Concurrently, monetary contributions also symbolise group membership. Of its millions of members, there are different levels of commitment and duties performed by the individuals. Specifically, a group known as the “checkbook members” does not extend their contribution beyond monthly monetary donations. Unlike the majority of Tzu Chi members who participate actively and contribution time and effort to the activities, this group only gives financial contribution to Tzu Chi. For the “active members” who invest time and effort to participate in activities, they can also contribute financially through donations. Monetary donations are important to ensure that there are funds for the organization to continue operating. Especially for informants who felt uneasy about donating or had initial reservations about their involvement with the group, the decision to pledge monetary sums to the group signifies an acceptance of group membership and commitment to Tzu Chi. Some members even faced problems trying to convince their family members when they first joined the group. When a Tzu Chi member decides to join the group, their contribution of time, effort and money represents their involvement and these different channels and networks will facilitate and maintain their commitment to the organization.

4.2 Religion and state

There are structural conditions which allow Tzu Chi to flourish in Singapore society. It is important to examine the relationship between religion and the State to understand Tzu Chi’s growth in Singapore. Also, the society experiences a phase of

religious change and Tzu Chi's popularity must be analysed in the context of the rise of Buddhism in Singapore.

4.2.1 State's management of religion in Singapore

An absence of state religion and the availability of different religions and religious organizations, the religious domain is likened to a religious marketplace. With a diverse range of religions practiced in Singapore, seemingly harmonious and cohesive, there exists a potential for religious competition or conflict. To maintain religious harmony and tolerance in the secular state, the legislation of "Religious Harmony Bill" in 1990 which led to the formation of a Presidential Council ensures an avenue for State intervention. Religious profiling can be illustrated in the formation of Inter-religious Organisation in Singapore (IRO)⁷² in 1949 represents nine religions - Hinduism, Judaism, the Zoroastrian faith, Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism and the Bahá'í Faith. Also, the 1980 population census in Singapore, seven options under the category "Religion", defined as the faith or spiritual belief as stated by the person regardless of how faithfully he practices it (Chian, 1983:169). Religious choices in the Census include; Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Taoism, Other Religions and No religion. There is an attempt by the State to classify religionists into specific groups based on their religious affiliation and beliefs. The state is a strong proponent of religious harmony and has a stake in the religious

⁷² The Inter-religious Organisation in Singapore (IRO) had its beginnings as the Inter-Religious Organisation of Singapore and Johor Bahru which was officially launched on 18 March 1949. It was renamed the Inter-Religious Organisation of Singapore in 1961.

When Maulana Abdul Aleem Siddiqui, a well known Muslim missionary, visited Singapore in 1949, an inter-faith reception for him sparked the idea for an inter-faith organisation. Sir Malcolm Macdonald, then the British Commissioner General for Southeast Asia, helped to propel this vision into reality. The public launch of the Inter-Religious Organisation of Singapore and Johor Bahru, which was held in the Victoria Memorial Hall on 18 March 1949, saw a crowd of 2,000 believers from various religions. The first President of IRO was Reverend Dr. H. B. Amstutz. In 1961, the organisation was renamed the Inter-Religious Organisation in Singapore.

profiling of its citizenry. Religious firms do not operate in a free market under a laissez-faire system and are expected to maintain harmonious relationships.

There are three different management styles which characterize the state's involvement in religious affairs (Ling, 1987:2). (1) The state may adopt an attitude of hostility to all religious institution, and harass and in some cases persecute those who engage in religious activity: the Soviet Union is an example of this type. (2) The state may be constitutionally committed to one religious tradition, as in the case of the Church of England, or Thai Buddhism. In such cases the religion concerned is known as the state religion, and this may receive recognition on certain public state occasions. (3) The state may adopt a tolerantly neutral stance towards religious institutions, with occasional patronage of certain religious institutions or occasional action to control religious excess where necessary.

Ling argues that the third type of relationship is most often what is meant by the use of the designation 'secular state'. In such cases the state is in principle religiously non-committed but may without inconsistency extend patronage to religious events on specific occasions. Of which, it is evident that the passing of the Religious Harmony Bill is an important legislation which demonstrates the nature of the 'secular state' in Singapore. It is clear that the secular state⁷³ does not entirely detach or intervene directly in the religious affairs and practices. Nevertheless, the formation of a Presidential Council legitimizes an avenue for state intervention⁷⁴ when necessary.

⁷³ The secular position of the Singapore government is thus a vital component in the political management of multi-religious elements in Singapore society. Individuals who use religious institutions as a platform for political activism are immediately detained and punished. In 1987, several members of the Catholic Church and Catholic student organizations in the local universities were arrested as Marxist conspirators (White Paper, Maintenance of Religious Harmony, Dec 1989).

⁷⁴ The State limits proselytizing to behind closed doors and only between members or willing, potential members of a religious group. All societies are to register with the government, Registrar of Society. Religious groups are kept under watch by the Internal Security Department E.g Jehovah's witness is banned in Singapore for its promotion of subversive ideologies. The group professed non-violence and objected to Singapore's implementation of compulsory military conscription (National Service).

Since religious switching or conversion is possible, state intervention in managing religious affairs is evident and religious firms do not operate in a free market under a laissez-faire system. The state asserts a strong position in promoting and ensuring religious harmony among the different groups and has a stake in the religious profiling of its citizenry. Religious groups are expected to maintain harmonious relationships; individuals can select their religion, become a member of any group and manage their own participation in the religious community. Although religious freedom is constitutionally guaranteed, the religious domain in Singapore is conditioned according to two major discourses; (1) the separation of religion from formal politics, and (2) religious harmony (Sinha, 1999: 80). Despite the religious profiling that categorizes citizens by their religious faith and the unitary membership structure in religious groups, Tzu Chi's membership is diverse. In the discussion on multi-religious and multi-ethnic membership in Chapter 3, I have explained that Tzu Chi consists of members who are non-Buddhists or non-Chinese. Tzu Chi's multi-religious membership within a Buddhist organization demonstrates a high level of religious harmony where members of different religious faith can share a common ground.

Unlike a traditional religious institution where membership is equivalent to religious affiliation, Tzu Chi's membership does not mean that all its members are Buddhists. Both religiosity and ethnicity are not barriers for Tzu Chi to attract non-Buddhists or non-Chinese to alternate into the group. In the religious marketplace, its niche marketing lies in the customization of religious experiences for members and shape their religiosity. Although Tzu Chi is termed as a Buddhist organization, its structure does not contradict the state's attempt to categorise religious identity. With members from other religions, one can choose their religion and align with a non-

Buddhist religious label. In this way, Tzu Chi can position itself favourably alongside the developments in the religious economy by assimilating members from other organizations to alternate and participate in its activities. How does Tzu Chi cope with the competition in Singapore's religious economy?

4.2.2 Religious change and the rise of Buddhism

The existence of so many religious groups in close proximity as well as the success of some religions in attracting converts from other religions creates an environment of religious competition (Stark and Iannaccone, 1994; Finke, 1990; Iannaccone, 1998). Tong (2007) studied the Singaporean context where part of the rationalization of religion entails different faiths competing for appeal to a relatively modernized society and competing religions are forced to modify and demystify their beliefs and practices, to present themselves in a more rational way.

Religious competition is inevitable when different religious organizations compete for members in the religious marketplace. In economic terms, organizations will strategize to position itself in a favourable manner to attract more believers. With the threat of losing adherents to other religions, various religious stepped up their proselytisation efforts in order to gain members. In fact, some religions that were primarily non-proselytizing religions such as Taoism and Buddhism, have become proselytizing religions to meet the challenge posed by Christianity. Since religious affiliation in Singapore is closely tied to ethnicity - Islam and Hinduism are perceived as ethnic religions. It can be argued that religious change among Malays and Indians are relatively low as religion is an important element in ethnic identity and self conception. The nature of religious change occurs primarily among the Chinese and religious competition centres on Christianity, Taoism and Buddhism.

Taoism has embarked on a systematic programme including the publication of books and pamphlets to explain the meaning and relevance of the religion in modern Singapore. Within Christianity, particularly in the 1980s and early 1990s, we see the advent of a strong charismatic movement, in response to what they view as the ossified nature of mainstream Christianity. This had resulted in the growth of Christianity, particularly among the young.⁷⁵ In the case of Tzu Chi, Beckford argues that the success of NRMs must be “inextricably woven into the social fabric, although the actual manner of their interweaving varies across movements, time and space” (Beckford, 1986:x). Thus, the popularity of Tzu Chi must be examined in the context of the rise of Buddhism.

As earlier mentioned in Chapter 1 in the review on religious revivalism, Buddhism has the largest group of believers and is the fastest growing religion in Singapore. In a multi-cultural society where a variety of religions are available, Buddhism is an attractive option and there are some developments which can account for its rise. There are significant changes in the teaching, learning and proselytizing of the Buddhist faith. The growth of Buddhist associations is an important development which demonstrates the popularity and expansion of Buddhism in the religious landscape. The development of Buddhist organizations, described as “associational Buddhism” (Ling, 1993: 160), characterizes the nature of Dhamma, body of doctrine that is taught by Buddha, in Singapore. This keen emphasis on Buddhist philosophy is propagated by various institutional bodies; The Singapore Buddhist Lodge, Singapore Buddhist Federation, Buddhist Union which provide lay Buddhist devotees an avenue

⁷⁵ In the 1960s to 1980s, the strategy of the church and para-church groups focused on attracting young converts. Outreach programmes however, realizing that it was reaching saturation point, and that there was a large untapped market of older Chinese particularly homemakers, there was a shift in the strategy, to attract these members. It is significant that this strategy worked and between 1990 to 2000 there was a significant growth of Christian adherents among those age 40 to 60 years old. (See Tong, 2007)

to share Buddhist ideas. The organizational structure and institutional features of Buddhist organizations (Kuah, 2003:225) have also changed. Unlike typical religious building or temple, Reformist Buddhist organizations are located in residential homes or office buildings, registered with the Registrar of Societies as secular societies instead of as religious institutions. With the formation of lay Buddhist groups (e.g. Singapore Buddhist Youth Fellowship, Buddha Sasana Buddhist Association) and promotion of doctrinal Buddhism among the younger Chinese, more opportunities are available for people attracted to Buddhist activities and teachings in the Buddhist canon.

In a modern society, rationalisation⁷⁶ has propelled educated and meaning-seeking individuals in searching for a religion that is relevant and comprehensible to the practitioner. Despite the availability of choice and competition among various religious traditions, Buddhism is an attractive option which has experienced a certain degree of revivalism and perceived to be a systematic, logical and relevant religion which is able to provide answers to questions on the meaning of life (Tong, 1992: 298-301). Buddhist religious organizations have responded to these trends and play a significant role in providing a strong infrastructure for Buddhists to interact, fellowships groups to share their religious beliefs and outreach programmes to propagate Buddhism.

The intellectualisation⁷⁷ of Chinese religion (Tong, 1992:302) accounts for efforts to distinguish Buddhism from Taoism, where the latter is perceived to propagate folk beliefs or superstitions, regarded as the irrationalities of traditional Chinese religion. An increasing differentiation between these two religions reveal the overlaps in Taoism and Buddhism and attempts to sort out differences and eliminate

⁷⁶ See Footnote 18.

⁷⁷ See Footnote 19.

confusion which arises from the syncretic nature of Singapore's Buddhism. Many religionists use a key feature of Buddhism, a methodical and organized doctrine applicable and relevant to one's daily lives, to describe the religion. Among better-educated Chinese, they are in search for a philosophical approach towards religion and aim to locate the traditional form of Buddhist teachings. In doing so, there is a tendency to consider themselves as Buddhists rather than Taoists. Similarly, this trend is also observed in my interview findings. Several of my informants tried to describe the differences between Taoism and Buddhism. Even when their religious behaviour includes Taoist practices, they claim to be Buddhists and explain that it is a general term that can explain their religiosity and membership in Tzu Chi.

Many people are starting to join Dhamma classes or religious classes. Some read religious texts to understand the teachings. In the past, I think people often felt that action was more important. They pray, burn joss sticks, incense paper. Many did not even understand what it meant but followed. Now, more people want to understand what is religion, why they practice certain actions. Many Tzu Chi Buddhists attend the classes and sharing sessions. Some also attend other temples' activities. (Fu Cheow, 60, Chinese-Buddhist)

Tzu Chi's brand of Buddhism is appealing to members who are seeking a Buddhist institution to learn about the religious teachings and practice it. At the same time, it combines Buddhism with a this-worldly and social-humanistic orientation. In this way, Tzu Chi is not only able to attract the Buddhist believers but also non-Buddhists who are interested in the social role and community engagement of a religious group. Tzu Chi's religious activities and classes are responding to the trends in the religious economy. For instance, Tzu Chi members can align themselves with Buddhist teachings taught in the religious classes and activities. Membership in Tzu Chi is described as an avenue to understand religion through the different forms of participation. It is a form of formal membership with a Buddhist institution for them

to explore religious tenets. According to my informants, many Tzu Chi members continue to visit other temples which they view as complementary to their Buddhist identity. Yet, temple-visiting has always been perceived as an ad-hoc and informal affiliation to a Buddhist group and insufficient to provide a systematic structure or a recognized and official form of membership and identity to a group.

With a climate of intellectualisation and rationalization of religion in Singapore, with stimulating demands from an educated population increasingly seeking a logical, philosophical religion, it is evident that religious options are adapting to these trends in the religious economy. Also, the rise in Buddhism, growth in Buddhist institutions also indirectly promotes Tzu Chi as a favourable choice in the wave of Buddhism's popularity. These trends are significant to understanding the changes in religious affiliation and religious shifts in Singapore. Tzu Chi is able to respond to the appeal of Buddhism among the population. While the popularity of Buddhism is widespread and "the attractiveness of Buddhism spans across Chinese Singaporeans of all ages, from all educational levels, and various socio-economic strata" (Tong, 1992: 296), this pattern is also observed in Tzu Chi.

4.3 Syncretic Buddhism

In a rational religious economy, there are pluralistic forms of Buddhism in Singapore. In spite of the growth of Buddhist organizations, central to the spreading of religious teachings an intellectualized population, the concept of "syncretism" is characteristic of Buddhism in Singapore. Any study on syncretic religion seeks to determine a level of ritual or religious purity in a religious tradition. In highlighting syncretic Buddhism in Singapore, it explains how Tzu Chi participation is complementary to "Buddhists" and "Chinese religionists" or even "Hindus". Also, this would mean that religious alternation and multi-religiosity is not an anomaly

since these members have syncretic religious practices. Taking into the development of Buddhism in Singapore and an understanding of the syncretic nature of Buddhism, this will highlight the concept of religious alternation occurring in Tzu Chi. This gives rise to “syncretic Buddhists” who will join Tzu Chi and adds to the varied patterns of religiosity and forms of “Buddhist identity” in Singapore’s Buddhism.

Although about 50 percent of the Singaporean population classify themselves as “Buddhists”, Wee challenges the usage of this single religious label by Canonical Buddhists, Chinese syncretic religionists and even Hindus who identify themselves as “Buddhist” (Wee, 1997: 170). She suggests an understanding of ‘Buddhism’ in a dialectical framework; it is on one hand ‘Buddhism’ as Canonical Buddhism and on the other hand ‘Buddhism’ as Chinese Syncretic religions with Buddhist elements, broadly classified as two main types, Shenism and sectarianism (Wee, 1997: 131). Thus, syncretism in Buddhism can be understood in how Chinese syncretic religions, which in fact make no direct reference to the Buddhist canon, is merely a socio-cultural fact where practitioners employ the term ‘Buddhist’ to describe their religious faith.

I go to Taoist temples, Chinese temple and Thai or Burmese temples. Many Buddhists also do this. Sometimes, some Buddhists even combine Taoists practice. Like going Taoist temple for New Year ritual to cleanse and bless for good fortune and health. They also go for Buddhist talks. Buddhists and Taoists have always been overlapping. (Mr Yap, 58, Chinese-Buddhist)

In Tzu Chi, it is no surprise that syncretic Buddhism contains elements from other religions coexisting with the canonical Buddhist tradition continues to persist in the religious practices of its Buddhist members. Syncretism in the Buddhist tradition has been normalized to the extent that “it was unusual for a Chinese temple to be regarded as exclusively Taoist or exclusively Buddhist in the earlier period of Singapore” (Ling 1993: 157). As my informants suggested, the “overlapping”

practices of Buddhists is a common phenomenon. In Tzu Chi, religious syncretism reveals multiple meanings and interpretation in understanding Tzu Chi Buddhism combined with other forms of Buddhist practices.

I have many Buddhist friends who try to invite me to their temples or classes. But my family prefers to follow one group or one kind of practice. I attend the youth class and my parents go for the communal cultivation for Tzu Chi. We do not go “temple-visiting” because we only wish to practice Tzu Chi’s teachings and beliefs. (Xing Yong, 21, Chinese-Buddhist)

For Group 1 (Religious) members, their degree of conformity towards a particular religious tradition is remarkable, to the extent that it surpasses the religious profiling of citizens imposed in a state-regulated marketplace. While the state merely attempts to classify citizens into specific categories for state’s management of religious affairs, Tzu Chi Buddhists like my informant, Xing Yong, are extremely precise with their Buddhist religiosity. Although syncretic Buddhism is a popular and common practice of other Buddhists, this group of members are in search of Buddhist teachings and a specific, defined membership in a single Buddhist organization. For Group 1 members, they are aware of the syncretic nature of Buddhism in Singapore but do not practice it.

From the interviews, a majority of my informants exhibit characteristics of a syncretic Buddhists. These members belong to category 2A (Religious and Social-Humanistic) and continue to mix and match practices as they alternate between different religious identities and environment.

In Tzu Chi, we can attend the religious classes. It is just like another Buddhist organization. Members can join other Buddhist groups too. There is definitely nothing wrong. Even people from other religions can come to Tzu Chi. It is very flexible. I seldom go for religious classes here unless my friends go. But I always attend the sessions at the Taoist temple I have been going for 15 years. I bring my children to pray to Confucius so they will do well in school. I also pray to Guan Yin at Waterloo temple. Jasmine, 43, Chinese-Taoist

Indeed, the interpretation of religious practices and teachings can be a subjective process and “Chinese religion is likened to an empty bowl variously filled with contents of institutionalized religions such as Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, the Chinese syncretic religions, or even Christianity and Hinduism” (Wee, 1975: 25). In this empty bowl, the syncretistic elements are a result of combining practices or beliefs from various permeable religious traditions. The absorbent nature of syncretic religion, in Buddhism or Chinese religion is a spirit-filled world of religious enchantment where foreign elements merge and create variations in religious practice. Syncretic Buddhism in Singapore means that the category of “Buddhists” includes Shenists, Taoists, Chinese religionists, Confucianists, Mahayana Buddhists, Theravada Buddhists or even Hindus who label themselves as Buddhists. Similarly, this phenomenon is also observed in Tzu Chi where my informants constantly identify themselves with several religious traditions and they alternate between different religious systems. The syncretic practices of “Buddhists” support the idea that Tzu Chi has a multi-religious membership of Tzu Chi where its members practice religious alternation.

The degree of alternation would be greatest for the syncretic Buddhists; a Tzu Chi Buddhist who visits Taoists, Thai or Chinese Buddhist temples. This group of members constantly switch and alternate between different Buddhist traditions as well as subscribe to both the social-humanistic and religious domains in Tzu Chi. They are free to participate in different forms of religious practices or activities at different religious institutions. In this way, a Taoist can continue practicing ancestral worship or a Mahayana Buddhist can still worship Guan Shi Yin Pu Sa (觀世音菩薩) and continue to combine these religious systems with Tzu Chi participation. Thus, it is interesting how a Buddhist can drift between different states of religious enchantment

yet religious alternation can be a rational explanation to account for their religious behaviour.

After joining different groups, temples, associations, I think Buddhism helps me to cope with life. My problems, family and business concerns are daily issues I think about and Buddhism helps me to handle them. Many Chinese have always been going to many temples. Whether they are really a Buddhist or not, it is easy to just call themselves Buddhist. They pray to God of Fortune or Taoists gods also say they are Buddhists. It is something that has been confused by many people. They think any Chinese temple is a Buddhist temple. Praying to any Chinese deity means Buddhism. (Mr Koh, 33, Chinese-Buddhist)

Even though many of my informants combine several forms of religious practices, they highlighted that they can find a satisfactory explanation for life from Buddhism and express that Buddhism provides a logical form of teaching which enables them to deal with life and accept living conditions. At the same time, it also illustrates how Chinese Syncretic religions make no direct reference to the Buddhist canon and it is merely a socio-cultural fact where practitioners employ the term 'Buddhist' as a label to describe their religious faith. In doing so, these members do not see a need to distinguish these religious practices and traditions which they classify as "Buddhist" and do not feel any cognitive dissonance in combining different systems together.

Looking at the different categories of Tzu Chi members, there are multiple meanings attached to the theology and practices of Buddhism. In examining Group 1 and Group 2A Buddhists in Tzu Chi, the differences highlight that Tzu Chi Buddhists are not sharing a unitary religion but rather, a broad religious category which encompasses a range of religiosity that can be structured analytically into distinct and separate religious systems. Indeed, their "'Buddhist' systems as practiced in

Singapore must be considered in the larger context of Chinese religious behavior” (Wee, 1997: 131).

4.4 Is Tzu Chi religion?

Tzu Chi presents an interesting Buddhist phenomenon - a modern Buddhist organization and an attractive religious option, well-positioned to thrive in the religious marketplace. Unlike other Buddhist organizations typically regarded as religious, monastic institutions or associated with mystical deities, traditional rituals, Tzu Chi’s systematic and organized structure performs religious and social-humanistic functions interpreted as relevant and significant to the rational, meaning-seeking population. With a this-worldly orientation and fundamental teachings from Engaged Buddhism, it places strong emphasis on promoting humanitarian concerns through action-oriented goals and missions. The dual-sphere framework and events are successful in creating a community of shared purpose which cuts across religious and ethnic lines. Tzu Chi in Singapore appeals to all spectrum of the social strata regardless of age, socio-economic status and even crosses ethnic or religious boundaries. What is the message that Tzu Chi has which is attractive to such a diverse population?

Tzu Chi, a lay Buddhist movement which focuses on improving living conditions and alleviating human suffering through secular action also aims at promoting humanity. As I have explained in the charity-humanitarian efforts of the group, Tzu Chi provides relief aid and welfare services to the needy. I argue that Tzu Chi retains traditional functions of a religious group yet it is also a social-community group which promotes social-humanistic values, this-worldly orientation and social engagement to bring about positive changes for the society. What distinguishes Tzu

Chi from other religions would be its task in propagating the four missions of humanitarian, medicine, education and charity which constantly create avenues for members to participate in events to effect change and improvement in the society.

Many members are social cocooned in this web of charity and altruistic spirit that Tzu Chi promotes. At the same time, the multi-religious membership attests to the universal appeal that attracts a wide base of members. Tzu Chi's charity mission is well-established and its wide range of activities provides choices for the converts to select the areas which they wish to contribute. As Tzu Chi supports the social role of religion's responsibility to society, it creates a social aspect that has been so well-established for members of any religion to learn of how salvation, an emphasis on the community and a this-worldly orientation can benefit those who are in need. In the midst of performing charitable acts, the members also feel a sense of pride to be associated with the group. Tzu Chi promotes religious values in an established and organized institution which is applicable and important to a modern religious practitioner. At the same time, its dual-sphere structure caters to non-religionists who are attracted to the social-humanistic values and activities that are organised by a systematic and efficient group which is able to fit into the a multi-ethnic and multi-religious secular society. The concept of "Great Love" (大爱) taught by Cheng Yen is an important teaching which strengthens this community of shared purpose through the promotion of humanistic values and community volunteerism. Tzu Chi advocates the belief that worldly salvation is obtainable through altruistic acts as volunteers seek spiritual happiness, self-fulfilment and a meaningful life in their acts of giving. In participating in the religious or social-humanistic domain of Tzu Chi, I argue that these members are actually participating in a **social religion with a unique Tzu Chi**

ethos. Thus, it can successfully attract and sustain a multi-ethnic and multi-religious membership.

Indeed, the persistence of religion is evident in how individuals are attracted to religious organizations and participate in religious activities. Yet, I have suggested how Tzu Chi's developments have shown that a social religion has moved away from that of a traditional religious organization. What Tzu Chi offers would be a religious habitus that propagates Buddhist ideology and teachings and is thriving on the popularity of Buddhism in the religious marketplace. Apart from the opportunity to understand Buddhism, it has a focus on this-worldly orientation and promotes an ethical and methodical conduct for members to learn and practice social-humanistic values. It can accommodate the multi-religious practices for its members who participate in Tzu Chi and retain the option of alternating between the different religious traditions.

Taking into account the developments of Buddhism in Singapore, the rationalization and intellectualisation in the marketplace has transformed religious seekers to search for institutionalized forms of Buddhist teachings. However, religious change is not simply progressing from an undifferentiated co-worldly, immanent faith or other-worldly orientation in religious life but a process of this-worldly ethicization is observed in Tzu Chi.

Tzu Chi members will always use this term, Tzu Chi ren 慈济人. What they mean would be a kind of behaviour and attitude one should have as a member. It is not about who is a Buddhist or from other religion or groups. But members are taught to have good character, personality and develop positive attitudes and habits. It is a change in one's way of life I guess. To be more concerned for humanity, be part of social change. To help, kindness and giving through the way we live our lives. (Wan Yi, 27, Chinese-Buddhist)

It is not solely a rational bureaucratic dual-sphere organization nor religious identity or group affiliation for members. Rather, Tzu Chi provides a certain ethical basis, a this-worldly orientation in its teachings and activities and a systematic membership which accommodates and fit what the religious seekers are looking for in the marketplace. In a dual-sphere framework, there is a myriad of religious and social-humanistic activities for its members. The conscious actions, belief systems and practices in Tzu Chi reveals a reflexive being who adapts to a particular Tzu Chi worldview and shapes one's life based on a certain way of life. It is precisely this process of ethicization which Tzu Chi places great emphasis on and alters one's religious life and the strict adherence and loyalty to a particular this-worldly orientation and Tzu Chi conduct which distinguishes Tzu Chi from other loosely organized Buddhist organizations. At this point, I shall borrow from the Weberian concept of "The spirit of capitalism" to accentuate the ethicization in Tzu Chi. Similarly, "what is preached [in Tzu Chi] is not simply a means of making one's way in the world, but a peculiar ethic. The infraction of rules is treated not as foolishness but as forgetfulness of duty. That is the essence of the matter. It is not mere astuteness, that sort of thing is common enough, it is an ethos" (Weber in Parson, 1976:51).

What is the ethos in Tzu Chi like then? Members are taught that altruistic actions is "the showing of compassion in this world leads to the realization of one's Buddha nature, and helps toward the realization of the truth of the interconnectedness of all living things, of all sentient life" (Clarke, 2006: 4). Obviously, the appeal and long-term commitment of Tzu Chi to its members would be the Buddhist religious teachings and ideology of Tzu Chi which forms the backbone of its organization. According to the core doctrine of Tzu Chi Buddhism, Xing Pusa Dao (行菩薩道) means that members should actually perform good deeds that will benefit others and

such acts are modern interpretations of Buddhism which is relevant to the contemporary society.

I always tell my friends this Buddha teaching, "Great compassion to strangers and great mercy for all". To be a Buddhist, it is not going to temple, attending Dhamma class, pray to deities or chant with the monks. Tzu Chi Buddhists believe we can walk on the Path of Bodhisattvas and reach out to the people suffering. Charity work and good deeds bless you with good karma and accumulate merits. But it is not practicing them and having a bad character or moral attitude. To help others or do good, you must discipline your life first. (Mrs Johan, 35, Indian-Buddhist)

At the same time, non-Buddhists are able to come to terms with Tzu Chi Buddhism and membership in a dual-sphere framework. My non-Buddhist informants explained that humanity, charity, compassion and the concern for self-fulfilment and a purposeful life that can bring about social betterment are common goals of Tzu Chi members which also gel them in the organization.

Many Tzu Chi friends always tell me that it is good that we can all Xing Pusa Dao (行菩萨道). I am not a Buddhist but it doesn't mean I cannot do charity work with Tzu Chi. I think it is more than religion or its teachings. We have a common purpose that unites us in helping others. It is about character development. We cultivate certain habits and perspectives that bonds us because we share the common vision. (Benjamin 27, Chinese-Christian)

Indeed, the strong sense of community and social cocoon of charity and altruism binds and affirms the social solidarity in the organization. Tzu Chi promotes a particular ethos which is attractive to Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike.

Tzu Chi volunteers clad in their “蓝天白云” (Blue Sky White Clouds) uniforms are involved in various activities and tasks at the Hall, creating a heart-warming and cordial environment. Members of Tzu Chi Foundation can visit the Hall every day and are warmly received by volunteers on duty at the reception. The Hall is also open to the public who can gain a deeper understanding of Tzu Chi through the volunteers' guidance and explanation (Anne, 47, Indian-Christian)

As members perform their roles and responsibilities, they are conscious about their demeanour and presentation of self. A fundamental basis of ethicization in Tzu

Chi, members are taught to observe Tzu Chi teachings and cultivate good morals and excellent conduct through their practical actions. This ethicization to become a Tzu Chi ren 慈济人 can be understood in the promotion of Tzu Chi Ten Commandments⁷⁸ which are principles to cultivate a desired type of moral conduct so that one would be a responsible individual. This will also create a pleasant and affable environment when Tzu Chi members are able to build cordial inter-personal relationships with the people whom they interact with.

An awareness of piety, good fortune and altruism are motivations for Tzu Chi members to be mindful of their conduct as they try to achieve good moral cultivation and benefit the community. All Tzu Chi members are taught that love, compassion, joy and unselfish giving are qualities which they strive towards so as to bring about the pure world of Tzu Chi by helping the needy, giving joy and eliminating suffering. In observing these codes of conduct, members who participate in social or religion or both aspects of Tzu Chi can cultivate a field of blessings and create a society of love. This concept of a Tzu Chi ethos is an important factor which it also accounts for why the cocooning experiences are successful when new members are encapsulated within such a distinct Tzu Chi culture. The Tzu Chi ethos creates a social cocoon where members and converts are surrounded in a social environment where people exhibit positive and pleasant characteristics like kind-heartedness, thoughtfulness and warmth. The promotion and display of such desirable qualities can attract and sustain membership to the organization when individuals are drawn towards such an appealing environment.

⁷⁸ (1) Killing of any sentient being; (2) stealing; (3) wanton sex conduct; (4) false speech; (5) alcohol consumption; (6) smoking or chewing of betel nut; (7) gambling, shares speculation, lottery; (8) disobedience to parents; (9) breaking of traffic rules; (10) attending or participating in political demonstrations or anti-governmental activities.

Tzu Chi's engagement with the community and promotion of a this-worldly orientation allows them to constantly shape and seek meaning in their own lives as they seek to reach out to other people. The social-humanistic values, charity and humanitarian efforts of Tzu Chi can be understood as initiatives which propagate the social role of religion's responsibility to society so its salvation placed more stress on the community and a this-worldly orientation. In doing so, members develop a particular Tzu Chi ethos to be a Tzu Chi ren 慈济人. In a dual-sphere organization which merges religious and social-humanistic functions, members can customise religious experiences and alternate between systems. In this way, even non-Buddhists can participate in this social religion and adopt a Tzu Chi ethos. One can retain any religious beliefs yet subscribe to the Tzu Chi's charity mission, aim to promote humanity and altruism. Regardless of religiosity, religious identity or practice, Tzu Chi can be understood as a social religion which delivers social-humanistic values, a universal message appealing to individuals regardless of ethnicity, religion or socio-economic status.

In this chapter, I have discussed the structural factors which explain Tzu Chi's appeal and growth in Singapore. Tzu Chi's efficient organizational structure, successful outreach programme and accomplishment in creating a community of shared purpose are important to account for how it sustains membership and monetary donations. Also, it is important to consider the external structural factors of how Tzu Chi develops in a secular society where it remains a competitive and popular option despite religious change and competition. The rise of Buddhism and the syncretic nature of Buddhist practices in Singapore are important trends which situate an understanding of how Tzu Chi is suitable and attractive to its members. I also suggest

that Tzu Chi is able to attract Buddhist and non-Buddhists through its universal message of social-humanistic values promoted in its role as a social religion.

How do we account for the persistence of religion in a modern, affluent society? If people are still turning to religion, what makes Tzu Chi more attractive than the other religious groups? What actually constitutes a social religion? Finally, Chapter 5 shall situate Tzu Chi in the context of the emergence of new religions representative of religion-affiliated humanitarian organizations.

Chapter 5

The Move towards Spiritual Humanism

5.1 Persistence of religion

The search for self-fulfillment and altruism, religious customization and religious alternation in a dual-sphere framework account for the appeal of Tzu Chi. Structural factors like the organizational structure, outreach programme, Tzu Chi's community of shared purpose also explain the success of Tzu Chi in reaching out to its members and ensuring continual growth in the organization. I shall now embark to link the discussion in Chapters 3 and 4 to the processes of globalization and the conceptualizations of 'humanity'. Robertson (1992) suggests that there is a religious dimension to globalization, understood subjectively in the sense that the issues it raises are fundamentally important questions about self-identity and the meaning of being human, both of which are increasingly considered not from the perspective of particular religions but in the wider framework of a shared humanity (Robertson in Clarke, 2006:6). By introducing two case studies on Sathya Sai Baba and Soka Gakkai in Singapore, the discussion will accentuate how new religions consist of members from different religious organizations are focused towards channeling resources and contributions toward social welfare services and highlight the importance of a common humanity which underscores the persistence of religion in society.

In the context of a modern, educated and affluent society, why do people continue to turn to religion? With the rise of engaged religions, it can be argued that religious humanism is an important explanation for the new universalism in contemporary societies. How do we understand the popularity of engaged religions to make sense of religion in contemporary times? What is the appeal to account for the

popularity and success of new religions? I suggest that **spiritual humanism, a new form of religious humanism**, would offer a refreshing insight in understanding religion and how new religious groups have sporadically developed in recent decades.

5.2 New Religions in Singapore

Humanism can be understood as a broad category of philosophies about ethics and human qualities. It comprises of several philosophical systems and is sometimes incorporated into religious ideology. Humanism seeks to support human interests and search for truth and morality. In doing so, it rejects explanations based on the supernatural, irrational beliefs, or texts of allegedly divine origin. Humanists suggest that human social and cultural problems are multi-faceted and endorse a form of universal morality, a universal system of ethics which applies to humanity.

As Humanism encompasses intellectual currents running through a wide variety of philosophical and religious thoughts, several strains of Humanism allow it to fulfill, supplement or supplant the role of religions, and in particular, to be embraced as a complete life stance. Religious humanism can be considered as religious, or embraces some form of theism, deism, or supernaturalism. However, it is not necessarily related or allied with organized religions but frequently associated with artists, liberal Christians, and scholars in the liberal arts. Religious humanism, in contrast with secular humanism, perceives religion as functional. Religion serves the personal and social needs of a group of people sharing the same philosophical world view and Edwards (1989) claims that religious humanism should not be seen as an alternative faith but rather as an alternative way of being religious.

At a personal level, religious humanism offers a basis for moral values, a set of ideals and methods for dealing with the realities in life, a rationale for living life

joyously and an overall sense of purpose. To serve the social needs of its congregation, religious humanist communities like Unitarian-Universalist churches have sprung up and offer an institutional setting for the moral education of children and ceremonies such as weddings, coming of age celebrations, child-welcoming and funerals. Unlike traditional orthodox religions, these institutionalized events are carried out with the main purpose of meeting social needs. For example, memorial services and funerals do not focus on saving the soul of the departed but on serving the family and loved ones by giving them a memorable experience of how the deceased was in life, while marriages are geared to the specialized needs of the couple (Edwards, 1989). Here, it can be argued that religious humanism also aims to promote the social-humanistic values and performs a social-community function. This is similar to the examples on Tzu Chi activities⁷⁹ which perform a social function to meet the needs of individuals and the community. For instance, Tzu Chi funeral would help the family members of the deceased to cope with the loss of a loved one. Tzu Chi teaches its members about the transience of life that our daily sleep is a momentary death in contrast to a permanent death in one's passing. In promoting a this-worldly orientation in line with Engaged Buddhism, one should be constantly engaged and participate in community efforts to bring about social change and improvements for the society to have a fulfilling and purposeful life.

The humanists who first wrote the Humanist Manifesto of 1933 envisioned religion as a system of beliefs, attitudes and practices that assist us in our attempt to become our best selves. Spirituality was seen as the personal quality of being aware, connected and committed to a life of well-being for others and for ourselves (Sechrest, 2003: 39). According to the humanist, 'spiritual' has become more 'naturalized' and

⁷⁹ For an in-depth discussion, see Chapter 3 Dual sphere participation: Religious and social-humanistic

religious humanism has become closely intertwined with spirituality. In other words, the spiritual has come to mean a realization of genuine human values on this earth (ten Hoor, 1954: 88). Increasingly, there is a connection between religious humanism and spirituality to understand the meanings attached to the human condition, religious and social life, morality and philosophical worldview of people. With the phenomenon of the rise in new religions as a backdrop, I proffer that religious humanism has evolved to a new form which places significant emphasis on the spirituality and the social.

Although religious humanism connotes the functional and social role of a religion, it is insufficient to explain and account for the increased emphasis on spirituality. Spiritual humanism encompasses the search for spirituality for one to achieve awareness of self and engagement with this-worldly pursuits as well as humanism which focuses on a promotion of social-humanistic values like charity, altruism, and volunteerism. In this light, I argue that spiritual humanism can explain the persistence of religion and is a fundamental basis to new religions.

In Chapter 3, I have presented the religious and social-humanistic domains in Tzu Chi and Chapter 4 demonstrates that Tzu Chi is a social religion with a Tzu Chi ethos. In my discussion, it is evident that Tzu Chi places a strong emphasis on the social, community efforts which promotes a sense of well-being and spirituality for the individual. In both religious and social domains, the members' search for spirituality is achieved through a this-worldly orientation and participation. Thus, they will be able to develop the quality of awareness and commitment towards achieving social changes to benefit themselves and the community. Even for members who join Tzu Chi for religious purposes, they believe that the religious domain places a fundamental basis on Buddhism and ultimately provides a form of spiritual fulfillment.

In their aim to learn and understand Buddhism, they believe that spirituality can be cultivated through their participation. These religious members are active participants of the social-humanistic activities and advocates of humanitarian concerns.

While searching for self-fulfillment, looking for avenues to channel their altruistic and charitable contributions to the society and practice religious teachings, I argue that this increasing connection between religious humanism and spirituality demonstrates an evolution of religious humanism to becoming spiritual humanism. It shows that the importance and function of religion continue to persist. With the rise of new religions, “the option for spirituality over religion and the stress on the need for a spirituality that pulls together, as it were, the world of the human and the divine, and that is relevant and self-empowering” (Clarke, 2006: 7) and this is indicative of the growing demand for spirituality. The prominence of spirituality is apparent in Tzu Chi’s activities and teachings and it would be apt to use spiritual humanism to describe the underlying concept to understand Tzu Chi and account for its appeal and popularity. Similarly, spiritual humanism is a primary element in other new religions which I will show in this chapter.

In the study of religious conversion in Singapore, an important facet has been the emergence and growing popularity of new religious movements. How do we account for the global expansion of new religions? Sathya Sai Baba Movement, Soka Gakkai and Tzu Chi Buddhist Foundation are also representations of spiritual humanism and they are “one way of attempting to explain the global character of the NRMs’ phenomenon: by considering them as part of this quest for a sense of self-identity and self-understanding and as part of the project of constructing a global self for a global world” (Clarke, 2006: 7-8). I shall introduce these two case studies which are pertinent to understanding spiritual humanism, explaining the popularity of new

religions in Singapore, thus illuminating the discussions on Tzu Chi which I have presented in the earlier chapters.

5.2.1 Sathya Sai Baba

The Sathya Sai Baba movement was founded in the early 1940s. Beginning as a relatively small congregation in the Indian hamlet of Puttaparthi, the movement operated both as a religious or spiritual group as well as a welfare organization and was especially popular with the poor and lower class masses that were periodically given food and healthcare services. The group grew astronomically from the mid 1930s, developing from a localized social movement to a transnational movement with over 1,200 centres in 137 countries. In Singapore, the movement has shown phenomenal growth from its first centre in 1975 to the establishment of 14 centres by 2006, and faces no significant anti-cult opposition as compared to the United States. The movement has attracted a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-national membership, in spite of the use of Sanskrit as the main language medium for spiritual devotions and the predominantly Hindu rituals and symbols used in their spiritual ceremonies and philosophy. This is similar to how Tzu Chi is also able to garner such a wide membership base comprising of multi-ethnic and multi-religious members in Singapore. Its ability to attract and retain members is distinct from traditional mainstream religions which are classified along ethnic or religious lines. The common goal for humanity and spirituality is an important factor to account for the success in creating a community of diverse backgrounds.

Most of the teachings and beliefs observed by the Movement were recorded and extracted directly from the speeches, discourses and spiritual messages that Sri Sathya

Sai Baba delivered to devotees who visited his ashram between the years 1953-1997⁸⁰. The movement's structural networking and acquisition of modern systems of communication allowed Sathya's daily messages on various themes of the week to be transcribed at the headquarters in Puttaparthi and sent to Sai Centres worldwide. The intended effect was to orientate the actions of its international members and encourage the observation of certain key principles. In looking at the general significant trends, "Love All, Serve All. Help Ever, Hurt Never" can be observed in key teachings of the movement with regard to spirituality and religion, service, and moral education. Similarly, Tzu Chi's communal cultivation showcases Cheng Yen's teachings and lectures through telecommunication devices and Tzu Chi publications are tools to deliver Tzu Chi teachings to a global audience. Both groups direct a universal message revolving around the concepts of giving and serving the community, promoting humanity and love to mankind so as to achieve social betterment.

The Permanent Charter officially released to the international community on 14th January 1981 saw the concretization of the Sathya Sai Baba's four guiding principles; (1) There is only one religion; the religion of Love, (2) There is only one language; the language of the Heart, (3) There is only caste; the caste of Humanity and (4) There is only one God, He is Omnipresent.⁸¹ These principles encapsulate the symbolic meaning of the collective, the motivation behind the Movement's desire to reach out beyond religious, ethno-linguistic and socio-political boundaries with the motivation of pleasing an omniscient, universal God. One of its main objectives is the improvement of individual spirituality and moral behaviour; the rules and guidelines set by the guru for his devotees, known as 'Sai Paths' (Santhosh, 1997:11) are based

⁸⁰ These discourses were eventually compiled into a 30-volume collection known as *Sathya Sai Speaks*, and are used extensively in spiritual study circles, discussions, and devotional sessions.

⁸¹ Charter of The Sathya Sai Organization and Rules and Regulations (For International Countries), p.9.

on the central principles through the notions of Prema (Love), Dharma (Right Conduct), Sathya (Truth), Shanti (Peace) and Ahimsa (non-violence)⁸², which in turn provide the motivation and sense of purpose for the movement's involvement in social work and action.

For Tzu Chi and Sathya Sai Baba, the spiritual ideas and teachings may be categorized into two dominant strains of logic: religious and practical. By religious logic, I mean the ideas and principles oriented to the explanation of what is sacred and what is profane, to the purpose of increasing the adherents understanding and belief in a sort of 'universal monotheism', one that embraces all other religions and religious ideas as having come from the same basic divine source. This religious logic in turn drives the practical logic, or 'practical spirituality', where the adherents engage in meaningful social action, that is the orientation of his or her personal and communal life according to certain shared values of common humanity. This effectively drives adherents to serve communities in need and actively take part in social welfare projects and humanitarian efforts all over the world. The social action that the adherents engage in justifies the meaning of that religious logic and reifies the symbolic meaning of those religious rituals and ideas. In this sense, devotees may draw from the teachings of their own traditional religious beliefs, and in most cases revitalize them, but concurrently maintain a link to a community made up of members of other religions.

The Sathya Sai Baba Movement attempts to galvanize its universal religious ideas by removing the additional obstacle faced by its current and potential adherents: the necessity of conversion. Sathya Sai proclaimed that "All religions are mine. There is no need for you to change from one religion to another. You carry on in your own

⁸² Charter of The Sathya Sai Organization and Rules and Regulations (For International Countries), p.8.

established modes and practices of worship, and when you do so, you will come nearer and nearer to Me” (cited in Singh, 1991:53). Elsewhere he declares that God “can be addressed by any name [...] that appeals to your sense of wonder and awe...It makes no difference at all” (Sandweiss, 1975:219). Indeed this approach has been extremely successful as the movement draws a diverse crowd of adherents in terms of occupation, religion, and ethnicity, including Buddhist monks, Christian students, Nepalese, Sikhs, Japanese and Africans (Singh, 1991:55). The multi-religious membership in Sathya Sai Baba is also observed in Tzu Chi. In this thesis, I have suggested that religious alternation allows member to alternate different religious systems and juggle multiple identities in different organizations. Also, religious customization would mean that members can select their participation in religious or social-humanistic domains. Thus, this will expand the membership to be inclusive to anyone who wishes to contribute or participate in the group.

The promotion of spirituality is also evident through the Sarva Dharma Stupa or lotus flower design. The symbols of 5 world religions were included on the lotus flower petals, namely Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, and Zoroastrianism. Each symbol had a dual function: firstly, it carried the meanings and teachings of its source, and secondly, it provided the opportunity for the guru to persuade potential adherents as to the relevance and plausibility of a universal spirituality by way of uncomplicated anecdotes. Although the religion of Zoroastrianism in terms of adherents number much less than any of the other major world religions, Zoroastrian ideas are widely believed to have influenced modern day religions more than any other form of religious belief in history especially in terms of the relationship between body and soul (see Boyce, 1979), and hence appears to be an important addition to the spiritual foundation of the movement.

The design of the lotus flower, a prominent symbol in Jainism, Buddhism and Hinduism, illustrates the movement's strong affiliation with the spiritual ideas of those other religions. This identification can be seen as an indication of the influence of those religious ideas on the movement's historical development over time. Also, it suggests that spirituality is an underlying element present in religions. In identifying with these religious traditions, the movement is able to incorporate those ideas into its own spiritual mantra with some level of credibility which would prove important as the driving force of the movement's practical logic. This practical logic is guided by moral and spiritual education, as well as social service.

The attainment of this ideal level of 'limitless' service requires stringent structural mechanisms that both govern and influence the conduct of the adherent. The movement's Codes of Conduct, also known as the '9 point spirituality', is essentially a list of detailed rules to be followed by an adherent pertaining to his or her spiritual and religious life. It is widely believed by the movement's leaders and followers that adherence to these rules will contribute positively to the devotee's desire and motivation for social service. Associated with these spiritual guidelines are the 10 Principles laid out which relate to the proper conduct of the adherent as a social being living in pluralistic 'secular' society. These set of principles govern issues like national pride, social, ethnic and religious tolerance, obedience to the law, charity, as well as general health and social conduct. These two sets guiding religious and social conduct maintain the balance between individual religiosity and the more pragmatic issues of community service and social practice.

Tzu Chi's way of promoting a universal spirituality would be its attempt to unify its members of various religious backgrounds and create a community of shared purpose. Similar to Sai Baba's 10 principles, the teaching of basic precepts is also

observed in Tzu Chi and it is known as the Tzu Chi Ten Commandments. With an identifiable Tzu Chi ethos, it provides an important spiritual foundation for members to gain awareness of their ability to initiate social change and contribute to Tzu Chi missions.

In Chapter 2 and 3, I have discussed a range of Tzu Chi activities to promote its four missions of charity, education, medical and humanity. Just like Tzu Chi's education arm, Sathya Sai Baba Movement also has education programmes in place. It can be broadly classified into two types. The first, the Sathya Sai Spiritual Education of Human Values (EHV) or *Bal Vikas* was conceived and implemented as a way to inculcate the children in the movement with Sai spiritual philosophy and beliefs. The aims of the EHV are threefold: (1) to create an awareness of human values and its importance, (2) teach students the benefits and process of moral reasoning, and more importantly, (3) the actual social practice of the two. Children are taught the appropriate behavior during rituals and to respond to certain symbols and actions, as well as to school them in the proper recitation of Sanskrit prayers and Sai mantras like the '108 names of Swami'. New adult members are asked to attend the Sathya Sai "Human Values" programme, while youths are encouraged to take courses for 'Spiritual Transformation' and 'Future Leadership'.⁸³

Apart from the EHV lessons, adults and youths are encouraged to participate in study circles, where philosophical and spiritual dialogue are encouraged based on any Sai discourses, religious texts, or ethical and moral issues that one encounters in daily life. These study circles are ideally meant to translate into actual social action, that is, every member is expected to act upon a wrong or injustice or to engage the problem or issue which has been brought up for discussion, rather than simply

⁸³ Decisions and Recommendations: 6th World Conference of Sathya Sai Organizations (Overseas). "Spiritual Transformation". 18-24 November 1995:3.

indulging in philosophical and psychological self-satisfaction. Study circles are generally held once a week at specific times to suit most members, but generally any similar kind of informal discussions of the sort are highly encouraged. It is clear that new religions take a departure from imparting canonical teachings or religious text but successfully take on an innovative and new approach which propagates social-humanistic values and community bonding through its education programmes. Tzu Chi's education programmes are designed for teenagers, children enrichment or even the collegiate youth association which provide a system to educate its members and instill the values and mindset in them. Through these programmes, members can be exposed to lessons which can help them understand and rationalize the meaning and value of their participation and efforts in their search for spirituality.

A key tenet of Sathya Sai's teachings is focused on the existential discovery of the Self. He insists that Man is God (see Murphet, 1982:100-7), based on the assumption that Man's "atma" or soul that resides in the physical body is inherently divine and therefore good. Although mankind has the capacity to self-realization in this sense, it is said that personal desires and egoism have made it less apparent. In Sai Baba, the concept of an Avatar in fact implies the culmination of that human-divine merger; an avatar is a man who has realized that his inherent divinity, and Sathya Sai's self-presentation as an avatar then provides an avenue of possibilities for adherents and potential adherents to attain such a divinity that is attainable by believers of all faiths.

Adherents believe that this divinity is attainable through acts of service to mankind; it is also the reason for such acts to be carried out, since according to the Sai spiritual logic, to serve another person is equivalent to serving God himself. The movement's emphasis on service draws on the belief that "Service to man will help

your divinity to blossom, for, it will gladden your heart and make you feel that life has been worthwhile. Service to man is service to God, for He is in every man and living being, in every stone and stump.⁸⁴

Similar to Tzu Chi missions, the Sathya Sai Baba has various initiatives in place, ranging from sending volunteers to welfare homes and shelters for the aged, mentally and physically disabled, and destitute, to temple cleaning and collection of old clothes for the needy. A major project initiated by the Sathya Sai Central Organization in Singapore is SAFFRON, or Sai Action For Family Relief Of Needy. SAFFRON attends to needy families by pairing them up with a “guardian family” from the movement, whose task is to attend to their material and non-material needs. Volunteers mainly provide advice, encouragement and moral guidance to their wards, which include residents in welfare homes as well as independent family units. On top of providing volunteers for non-material needs, services like medical aid, food and water are readily provided by these families where possible, while more serious cases are referred and directed to other welfare avenues more equipped to help them, like the Singapore Indian Development Association (SINDA).

The SAFFRON project requires long term commitment from its volunteers and is highly critical of the inconsistency and short-term initiatives of other welfare groups in Singapore due to poor volunteer numbers and sustained interest. For several years since its inception, SAFFRON has supported Sunlove Home for the mentally disabled and, according to project leaders, will continue to do so “...for many, many more years as long as there are people there who need help.” As a Central Council initiative, SAFFRON draws its manpower from all the Samithis (members) in Singapore as well as non-movement members who volunteer. Although the Samithis

⁸⁴ *Sathya Sai Speaks*, (IV): 43

may also adopt their own homes for long-term service⁸⁵, members and non-members continue to serve through the SAFFRON project which has been successful in social service.

Sathya Sai Baba's emphasis on service has been described as the result of a recognition of man's social nature, and is therefore oriented more in the secular than spiritual realm (Santhosh, 1997:13); other authors described the nature of service in developing Asian nations like India, Singapore and Malaysia as a way of reconciling spirituality with modernity (Kent, 2004:43). In both instances, the emphasis is on practicality and action, rather than a preoccupation with doctrinal and dogmatic notions of god, good, and evil. In fact, many informants affirmed the belief that service to the nation was an important part of their Sai responsibility and an extension of that spirituality. One respondent equated his volunteer teaching of computer skills at one of the Sai centres in Singapore to "equipping these workers who cannot afford to upgrade [their skills] with skills that will make them good model and vital citizens of Singapore". His logic and that of other respondents echo that of Sathya Sai, who declared in one of his discourses that devotees should take available opportunity to serve society in any way that they can, for "service is not limited to serving individuals. Any action that benefits the country is service. One should experience Divinity through the service rendered. There is no distinction between acts of service. It is immaterial whether you are serving the poor or the rich".⁸⁶

It is clear that both Tzu Chi and Sai Baba adopt a this-worldly orientation in promoting social service and community engagement. Members are taught to reach out to the needy in society and they believe that such actions will mean achieving divinity (Sai Baba) or self-fulfilment and altruism (Tzu Chi) which both share a

⁸⁵ The Sai Centre in Katong, for instance, adopted the Tampines Home for the aged and 2 others as part of its own monthly seva activity. Source: <http://www.saicentrekatong.com>

⁸⁶ *Sathya Sai Speaks*, (XXII): 23.

common concern with humanity. Both groups aim to teach its members the notions of self-awareness, the ability to translate their actions into benefits for the community, the practicality of their involvement and action-oriented efforts. I have discussed how Tzu Chi and Sathya Sai Baba both have a multi-religious and multi-ethnic membership, the focus on cultivating a moral conduct through its teachings and practices, a well-established educational programme, charity initiatives and social events to educate members in which spiritual humanism can be promoted. Next, I shall proceed with the other case study on Soka Gakkai to illuminate the discussion on spiritual humanism.

5.2.2 Soka Gakkai

Soka Gakkai was introduced to Singapore in the mid 1960s by Ushiro, a Japanese expatriate working in Singapore. Initially, it had a membership of only ten to twenty people, mainly Japanese expatriates meeting in the home of members for discussions and prayers. It grew gradually in membership, and by 1972, had a membership of about 100 members. In 1972, the group officially registered with the Registrar of Societies in Singapore and became formally known as the Singapore Nichiren Shoshu Association (NSA), an association of lay-believers of Nichiren Daihonsin Buddhism. Its explicit goal was to practice and propagate Nichiren Buddhism; "...as a part of the vital religious movement that cause(s) to flower of (the) Buddhist faith to bloom in every individual, and ultimately, to create (a) great wave of peace and happiness that encompasses the family, country, and the world" (see Chan 1988:1).

After its registration, NSA began a concerted effort at proselytisation, to propagate kosen-rufu in Singapore. It met with some success and by 1980, the

membership was estimated to be over 12,000 members. It is difficult to know precisely how many members they presently have as they are a tightly knitted group and wary of outsiders. Estimates range from a low of 40,000 members to a high of 150,000 members. Officially, the SSA listed 25,000 believers participating in SSA activities⁸⁷.

Whatever the true figure may be, given the small population size of Singapore of approximately 4 million people, and among all the new religions in Singapore, Soka Gakkai, has been extremely successful in recruiting new members. It should be noted that at the initial stages, the SSA, at that time known as the Nichiren Shoshu Association, was largely an organization of Japanese expatriates and growth was slow. The ascension of a Singapore leadership in the association coincided with the period of rapid growth, with a large number of Singaporeans joining the Association. At present, to cater to the large membership, Singapore Soka Gakkai has six centers located in various parts of the island⁸⁸.

Soka Gakkai Buddhism is sold in Singapore as very much a ‘this-world’ religion, as opposed to ‘the other-world’ religions such as Christianity and Islam. In sociological literature on religion, there is a conception of this world versus other-world religions (Benjamin, 1987). Transcendental (other-world) religion, include Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, and immanent (this-world) religion are examples like Taoism and Chinese religions. Transcendental religions portray a dualistic

⁸⁷ It is however, not clear whether these 25,000 households, which will make it about 100,000 members are individual believers. In addition, there is a category of believers, who follow Soka Gakkai, but yet to receive the *gohonzon*.

⁸⁸ The first SSA centre was opened in Geylang, Lorong 18 in the early 1970s, with the help of some personal donations from SGI president Ikeda. The Telok Blangah Soka Centre was opened in 1984. This centre hosted the visit of Daisaku Ikeda’s visit to Singapore in 1988. The Pasir Panjang Center was started in 1987. It was later converted to the Soka Youth Center in 2001. The SSA HQ Building in the eastern part of the island was opened in 1993. In addition, the Tampines Soka Center in the East and Soka Culture Center in the West were opened in 1998, and the Senja Soka Center in 2002. In addition, the SSA Anle temple opened in 1997 included the provision of a prayer hall with a capacity of 700 people, as well as a columbarium to house the remains of members.

universe, emphasizing the contrast between life in this world and life in the supernatural realm. This supernatural realm is viewed as the only true dwelling and the goal of salvation is to enter this realm, which becomes the central religious quest. The transcendental religions have also been called “world-rejecting” religions. On the other hand, this-worldly religions, while still portraying a dualistic universe, emphasize the importance of life in this world. In Chinese religions, the deities are accorded ordinary knowable characteristics, and are, in many ways, like human beings (Benjamin, 1987:21-22). Thus, for Chinese religions, the goal for adherents is to accumulate resources, whether wealth, health, or prosperity. Ritual performance is anthropocentric and ego-centric, and religious behaviour is human-centred rather than spirit-centred, and it is from the human point of view that the entire cosmos is viewed. Religion is primarily concerned with solving the problems of human existence (Wee 1977). The relationship between human beings and his/her gods is an instrumental one. The concept of a this-worldly orientation is closely intertwined with spiritual humanism. In performing charitable and altruistic acts in Tzu Chi, members believe that they are able to achieve self-fulfillment in their constant engagement to doing good deeds. In this way, both Tzu Chi as well as Soka Gakkai can be understood as a social religion, aimed to perform the social services and provision of welfare through its lay members. In doing so, their actions will be beneficial for mankind and bring about improvements to the human condition. Again, spiritual humanism is an element in the activities and teachings of both groups.

Many are attracted to the fact that Soka Gakkai is a textual based religion, and point to the deep philosophical underpinnings of the Lotus Sutra. Similar to Tzu Chi Buddhist teachings, this is often compared to what they see as the “superstitious” and “irrational” nature of their previous religion, Taoism. An informant said, “Soka

Gakkai is based on the Lotus Sutra, the greatest of all the Buddhist sutras, and the final and most important set of scripture. The Lotus Sutra is the true teaching of Buddhism. I often ask myself about the meaning of life. How can I ensure my well-being? I find the answers in the Lotus Sutra. Soka Gakkai is the highest form of Buddhism. It is very practical and helps me live my daily life.” This is another important feature of new religion which promotes a this-worldly orientation focused on practicality of actions and humanitarian concerns. When an individual is aware of his existential self and seeks to engage in community efforts, this represents a search of one’s well-being and spirituality to achieve a meaningful life.

Another characteristic of new religions would be the multiple ties and high degree of participation, across age and gender lines. In Soka Gakkai and Tzu Chi, such a structure has created a strong loyalty to the organization. At Soka Gakkai, this reticulate hierarchical structure is maintained by a well-defined leadership structure. At every level, a member is assigned to a group leader, who acts as a conduit to the central leadership. Leaders hold regular meetings to discuss strategies for proselytisation and keep the Headquarters informed about the various groups, thus ensuring a high degree of social control within the organization. Such a network also helps to ensure an environment for the correct practice and understanding of Nichiren Buddhism. Moreover, the organization caters not only to the religious needs of the members, but to the social and recreational functions as well. There is a constant stream of programs linking the individual to the group, which help build group identity. Many informants mentioned this to be a particularly appealing aspect of Soka Gakkai. In Chapter 4, I have also described the organizational structure of Tzu Chi and how the overlapping groups create a social cocoon which encapsulates an individual within the organization. In doing so, the organization will develop a strong

community which focuses on common goals and vision. In both groups, the commitment towards promoting spiritual humanism is possible through these social groups and members that will constantly monitor and encourage one's participation in the organization. This will also indirectly ensure that manpower supply is available for any large-scale community events and any form of social welfare services can be adequately provided by the members.

Soka Gakkai is very successful in terms of outreach and establishing various affiliates. In Singapore, it takes part in the National Day Parade practically every year and it is associated with Soka Kindergarten and the Buddhist Philosophy Research Centre. It also runs the Day Education and Activity (DEA) Programme for Senior Citizens, opened in 1998 with the purpose of empowering the elderly with skills and knowledge to sustain their emotional and social independence. It has also been active in raising funds for the Society for the Physically Disabled, for the Kidney Dialysis Foundation and the Community Chest. Overseas trips to provide international relief for flood victims in China, Turkey earthquake victims are supported. Again, this is similar to how Tzu Chi has a successful outreach programme and its well-established charity, medical and humanity missions which promotes such social welfare services. Soka Gakkai's concept of Buddhism in Nichiren Buddhism is a highly collectivist one, allowing for a very social religion. As a lay Buddhist movement, it is constantly involved in many activities and communal work. Thus, social meaningfulness is an important part of members' participation. Just like the social cocoon in Tzu Chi, many individuals volunteer themselves and contribute significantly to the social activities and community programmes which define meaningful and personal importance in a web of social relationships.

In the discussion in Chapter 4 on how members enjoy a sense of self-fulfillment, good physical health or even feelings of being blessed from their Tzu Chi participation, one of the important reasons to account for the popularity of Soka Gakkai would be the benefits which members gain from faithful chanting. It is suggested that part of the attraction of Soka Gakkai Buddhism is that it is fundamentally an instrumental religion. The daily rituals such as the chanting the phrase, *nam-myō-renge-kyō*, together with the reading of the *gongyō*⁸⁹ every morning and evening in front of the *gohonzon*⁹⁰, is believed to bring immediate benefits to the practitioners. For example, one informant said, “After my wife gave birth, she suddenly became mentally unstable. We just could not explain it. It was so bad that I had to admit her to the hospital. I was desperate so I chanted for her recovery. I asked my wife to chant along with me. Initially, she was afraid. However, at the altar, I asked her to follow my example and chant with me. As we chanted, the *Gohonzon* helped us. Everyday I would face east and chant in front of the altar. The power of the *Gohonzon* is very, very strong. My wife did not have to take much medication, but she was cured after the chanting.” When asked how often a person is supposed to chant, he replied, “The more you chant, the better it is for you. It is like a bank. You can chant a lot and save it. Therefore, the more you chant, the better it is.” It is clear that for many of the informants, the reason given for conversion relates to “miracles” that they have experienced because of the religion or chanting. Most of these relate

⁸⁹ *Gongyō* is a Japanese word that means "assiduous practice" and refers to a formalized service performed by followers of nearly every Chinese, Korean, and Japanese Buddhist denomination. It is often done once or more times a day and consists of the recitation of a sutra passage or passages, a mantra or matras, or a combination of both. *Gongyō* can be done at a temple or at home, almost always in front of an object or objects of veneration and accompanied by offerings of light, incense and food.

⁹⁰ *Gohonzon* is the object of devotion in many forms of Japanese Buddhism. In Japanese, *gohonzon* can refer to any such object of devotion, whether a statue or set of statues, a painted scroll of some sort, or some other object. In Soka Gakkai, it is the object of veneration and *gohonzons* are enshrined in an altar called a *butsudan* that is considered the "home of the Buddha" by Buddhists. Nichiren Buddhists treat *Gohonzons* with utmost respect, since most of them consider the *Gohonzon* to embody the "life" or "life condition" of the Buddha, and they generally avoid touching the *Gohonzon* except for cleaning. *Gohonzons* that have become soiled or damaged are returned to temples for ceremonial disposal.

particularly to health or personal problems. The practice of chanting is also a representation of achieving and understanding spirituality as well as a this-worldly concern for social life.

5.3 Accounting for popularity of New Religions

In understanding the popularity of new religious movements, it must be seen in the context of general revivalism of religion in Singapore. In Chapter 4, I have discussed the phenomenon that Buddhism has the largest group of believers and it is the fastest growing religion in the country. In a multi-cultural society where a variety of religions are available, Buddhism is an attractive option for Singaporeans and this attests to the persistence of religion in a modern state. Why is there a persistence of religion and how do we account for new religions increasingly gaining a foothold in the Singaporean population? Why are new religions popular? While I have discussed how spiritual humanism, propagated in Engaged religions is widely accepted and well-received, a more important and specific question would be why particular new religions are able to attract more converts.

A large multitude of new religions are available but Soka Gakkai, Tzu Chi and Sai Baba are able to successfully adapt themselves to the local religious economy. Religious practices, choice of Singaporean religious leaders and suitable activities are initiatives to make the group relevant and applicable to the adherents. Most studies on the success of new religions have focused on their universalistic appeal. For example, Metraux, trying to explain the success of Soka Gakkai International, argues that, “Soka Gakkai has a message that appears universally relevant in many countries on a foundation of Buddhist ideals (Metraux 1986: 365). Others also look into its theology, particularly its claim to be a religion of self-empowerment (Teng, 1997; Wilson,

2000). I suggest that spiritual humanism is an important factor to account for the social-humanistic emphasis of new religions which seeks to promote humanity and spiritual humanism and the social role of religion.

While there may be truths to these claims, it really cannot explain groups in various countries see the religion in the same way. Individuals who turn to Soka Gakkai in the United States of America and in Great Britain, are very different, both in background, socio-cultural values, and previous religious orientations compared to those in Singapore or Malaysia. Thus, I suggest that an understanding of religious change must take into account the institutional conditions and social environment that the converts are embedded in. While there may be some commonalities, the success of a particular religion in different parts of the world need not be explained by the same reasons. For example, one of the popular theses for accounting Americans turning to a new religion is the “integrative thesis”. However, many Asian youths do not experience the same angst felt by American youths. Yet, they are also turning to new religions. Moreover, I would further argue that even within the same institutional environment, different groups of people who convert to the same religion may not be doing it for exactly the same reason. After all, one of the features of a successful religion is precisely the fact that its theology is flexible and able to adapt to the different conditions and interpretations of its theology by the new converts. Another problem in understanding conversion is that most studies have been done on conversion to Christianity, or in Western contexts. Those studies suggest that religious conversion is not only a change in beliefs but also a process of change in personal identity.

Indeed, the popularity of new religions cannot be simply explained by a single and dominant reason. This is clearly exemplified when we look at the informants who

switch to Soka Gakkai. As noted earlier, Soka Gakkai has been most successful in attracting middle-aged Chinese housewives. This group forms the largest single constituency of Soka Gakkai in Singapore despite the significant number of younger Chinese. The majority of them were formerly adherents to traditional Chinese religion such as Taoism, and ancestor worship. When asked why they switched to Soka Gakkai, one is immediately struck by the fact that the informants interviewed were not so concerned about the history of Nichiren, or Soka Gakkai, but rather the benefits that they would gain from faithful chanting. Members of the other two groups also highlight favourable outcomes as a result of their participation; achieving a sense of self-fulfilment and search for spirituality as reasons for their religious alternation. Similarly, the analysis in Chapter 3 on why people join Tzu Chi, different groups of informants attributed different reasons or motivations. Furthermore, Tzu Chi's ability to reach out to the wide spectrum of society, regardless of age, gender, socio-economic status, education, ethnicity or religion meant that there were various conversion narratives which informants shared and it was a complex task to identify a particular group of members as the most significant group in the organization. Nevertheless, it was apparent that there were several prominent reasons for participation; individuals are able to find a channel for "doing good" and performing altruism, gain self-fulfilment and customize the religious experience. By participating in Tzu Chi, members aim to find ways for self-discovery and seek to achieve spirituality as they embark on the various social-humanistic efforts aimed to promote humanity.

The other large group of Singaporeans attracted to Soka Gakkai is the young Chinese-educated Chinese. I suggest that the motifs for conversion to Soka Gakkai for this group of people are different from those of the older Chinese housewives. In the

interviews with them, the common reasons given for turning to Soka Gakkai is not the religion of miracles and instant benefits, but rather that it is a rational, systematic religion. For example, one informant noted, “I find Soka Gakkai to be a systematic religion. In Soka Gakkai, I am especially drawn to the idea that all people bear the potential for Buddha-hood. Nichiren has diagnosed the cause of man’s afflictions; a world of hatred, greed and warfare. Through believing in the Lotus Sutra, and chanting, it provides a vehicle to bring peace and salvation to mankind.” In the discussion on the teachings and practices of Tzu Chi, I have shown how my informants described Tzu Chi as a well-established, bureaucratic and efficient organization which focuses on practicality of actions to initiate changes and promote a better world. The formal organization management style and competent planning of Tzu Chi and new religions like Soka Gakkai or Sathya Sai Baba can also be appealing factors which attract the modern religionist in search of established and proficient channels to engage in community action and practice the social role of religion.

In studying religious change, a model of conversion which entails a transformation of identity, reorientation in behavioural and cognitive referents, and a displacement of the universal discourse, may not be very useful. In the interviews with the informants, it was clear that the conversion to Soka Gakkai, particularly for the older Chinese, did not mean for them a change of identity or discourse. Rather, they retained many elements of their previous religion, melded and amalgamated with the new religious system. In a sense, the term religious conversion may not be the most appropriate term. Rather, it is a process of “religious re-labelling”, “religious switching”. I have suggested in Chapter 3 that “religious alternation” would be an appropriate and relevant description of the religious behaviour of converts who

constantly switch religious identity and alternate between the different religious systems as they juggle several religious participations and affiliations.

Religious alternation would account for the interesting phenomenon which was observed; how converts can take on various religious ideas that may conflict together. For instance, Soka Gakkai or Tzu Chi members, while taking on the organization's identity, might continue to practice ancestral worship. The notion of religious alternation can be used to examine a particularly interesting form of religiosity displayed by Christians who attend Tzu Chi and Sai Baba activities. Certainly, this runs against the classical literature on conversion which explains it as an identity switching process. There are Tzu Chi and Sai Baba members who profess themselves as Christians. Clearly, the religious worldview, practices, teachings and practices of Christianity are distinctly different from the new religions discussed in this research. However, these non-Buddhists and non-Hindus are able to accept the ideology of a different religion and participate in the activities without any cognitive dissonance. As Berger (1963) mentions, rationality and personal comprehension are not major barriers to a religion. The notion of religious alternation certainly is of great value to understand how individuals "alternate" their religious identity and are able to juggle the demands of participation and subscribe to two or more religious systems of diverse characteristics.

In a multi-ethnic society, an interesting feature about religion in Singapore would be the intertwined relationship it shares with ethnicity. Membership in religious organizations and adherence to particular religious faith is often structured along ethnic lines. Islam can be considered a religion for the Malays, Hinduism for the Indians while the Chinese believe in Christianity, Taoism or Buddhism. Yet, new religions are able to attract people of various ethnic and even religious groups. Sai

Baba, Soka Gakkai and Tzu Chi transcend the boundaries of ethnicity and challenge seemingly rigid religious-ethnic classification. In these new religions, its universal appeal is cross-cutting and one can find multi-religiosity in a religious organization. Members with a prior religious affiliation are able to alternate and combine different practices from different religions.

5.4 Spiritual humanism and Tzu Chi

Spiritual humanism, propagated in new religions which have a this-worldly engagement with the community can very well account for the success of Tzu Chi. However, a more important and specific question would be why particular new religions are able to attract more members. It is the aim of this thesis to account for the factors of appeal which explains Tzu Chi's growth and expansion in Singapore and one way to do so would be to highlight the elements of spiritual humanism in the organization.

In Tzu Chi, members encounter the experiences of "doing good", altruism, self-fulfilment or the benefits of participation and customise their participation to suit their individual needs and preferences. Tzu Chi's dual-sphere allows members to subscribe to both religious and social functions in an organization which has an effective social cocoon and strategy of recruitment. One can argue that religiosity, religious participation and membership have become fluid categories within a particular organization. Conversion, in the strict sense of identity switching and a complete change from one religion to the other, becomes obsolete in understanding the religious affiliation or membership in organizations. New ideas of joining religion have developed alongside the growth of new religions. In Chapter 3, I suggested 3 levels of understanding religious affiliation in Tzu Chi – The first would be (i)

Religion, where these adherents strictly abide to the religious ideology, teachings, practices and rituals of the particular group. Next would be (ii) Social/ Religious which allows individuals to selectively participate in the religious or social activities so long as their needs are fulfilled. Finally, the (iii) Social would mean that members are only participating in events that are non-religious, without any religious connotation or religious proselytisation.

In these three forms of affiliation, members are given the freedom to alternate between different religious groups, and ethnicity no longer becomes representative of any particular membership. In this sense, Christians and Catholics can attend their Church and go to Tzu Chi Free Clinics, Buddhists can attend Sai Baba prayer sessions and Taoists can practice ancestral worship and chant Soka Gakkai religious prayers. Members of any religious groups are free to alternate into these new religions and manage their affiliation. They have the choice to retain, abandon their previous religious practices or even combine it with these new forms. More importantly, their participation in Tzu Chi is reflective of spiritual humanism. In understanding spiritual humanism, religion does not necessarily mean a social congregational activity or symbolic actions for one to maintain a relationship with the sacred. Rather, religious alternation has facilitated multi-religious and multi-ethnic members to align their search for spirituality together, learn the social-humanistic values and embark on action-oriented activities targeted to benefit the social environment. Moving away from understanding religion as purely a form of religious dogma, authority and canonical religious teachings, this model allows us to make sense of the social dimension of religion where spiritual humanism in new religions promotes a this-worldly orientation and an engagement with the social world. Through active involvement in the community and a focus on issues revolving around the human

condition, engaged religions and spiritual humanism respond to the problem of modernity and what modern religious seekers are looking for in a religion – spiritual humanism.

Spiritual humanism in Tzu Chi is evident in the efforts of members working towards the betterment of society. In promoting the Tzu Chi practices and aligning closely with Engaged Buddhism (人间佛教), Tzu Chi's social-humanistic missions has made an impact and significant transformations on many whose lives have changed. At the same time, members can achieve their commitment to spirituality and humanity through a this-worldly orientation in their attempts to reach out to those in need or create social change.

In general, this chapter has demonstrated the persistence of religion and spiritual humanism evident in new religions in Singapore. The case studies provide a relevant and useful lens in examining the nature of involvement and participation in new religions. I argue that religious humanism has evolved to a new form which places significant emphasis on spirituality and the social. Spiritual humanism can be understood in line with the phenomenon of new religious groups that sprung up in recent decades. It is a movement towards a humanistic system which promotes spiritual awareness and the search for spirituality. "The direct nature of the religious experience is that this new spirituality often appears to be one of its more attractive features. It creates a new understanding of the historical space between the actual and potential state of an individual in that, in contrast with most long established religions, it brings the possibility of full self-realization within reach in the present. It makes it constantly available, the only hurdle to overcome being that of ignorance about the nature of one's True Self. The distinction between earth and heaven is in this sense annulled. The former is no longer seen as a place of limitations and the latter one of

unlimited potential” (Clarke, 2006: 8). In the promotion of these new religions that are socially engaged, these new groups align religious goals towards humanitarian concerns and adopt a this-worldly orientation. In this move away from traditional religion to engaged religion, there is a focus on self-fulfilment and search for spirituality in the unlimited potential of one’s ability to reach these goals. Through the process of transforming the social world and alleviating the suffering and problems of human condition, a new religious orientation and form of interpretation has been created.

5.5 Conclusion

This thesis aims to explore the popularity and appeal of Tzu Chi to account for its growth in Singapore. As I have shown, the success of Tzu Chi consists of multitude factors which are analysed from my informants’ religious alternation and membership experiences. The narratives in Chapter 3 shed light on the importance of altruism, self-fulfillment and religious customization which facilitate one’s membership into Tzu Chi. With a dual-sphere framework that caters to social and religious needs of members, this distinguishes Tzu Chi from a typical religious organization which performs religious function per se. At the same time, it makes religious customization possible for Tzu Chi members and attracts a multi-religious and multi-ethnic membership. Thus, religious alternation occurs when religious affiliations are combined from various groups. Tzu Chi members negotiate their membership in a Buddhist organization and selectively participate in Tzu Chi activities. For instance, a Hindu can continue to worship Hindu devas or devis gods or a Catholic can go for his mass at church but both can be accepted into Tzu Chi as non-Buddhist members. This gives rise to a range of Tzu Chi membership, involvement

and 3 main categories of Tzu Chi members; (i) Religious, (ii) Religious & Social-Humanistic and (iii) Social-Humanistic. Tzu Chi's religious customization, dual-sphere framework and religious alternation suggest a rethinking of the concepts of conversion in religious change.

I suggest that religious alternation is an important analytical concept which provides an appropriate description to illustrate the religious change and affiliation of members in new religions. Conversion has traditionally been used to refer to a set of ideas to indicate complete identity transformation, psychological change or shifts in religious practices, identity or affiliation after encountering and identifying with a new religion. However, in suggesting the term religious alternation, it can capture the social reality of how individuals "alternate" between different religious worldviews and it seeks to explicate the contextual, situational and gradual changes in the alternating experience. Also, it explains the different levels of participation and involvement of Tzu Chi members. It necessitates a change in the understanding of conversion and sheds light on the changing religious experiences of member situated within an analysis of the structural features of Tzu Chi and the religious landscape in Singapore to better understand one's everyday performance of religiosity and identity.

In examining Tzu Chi's appeal and rapid expansion, Chapter 4 discussed the success of Tzu Chi's organizational structure, outreach programme, the tight-knitted community which ensures a strong sense of shared purpose and the reticulate-structure of a social cocoon which sustains the participation and contribution of its members. It can reach out to a wide base of members through its well-established structure that provides a range of services and activities for non-members to interact and learn about Tzu Chi. With an effective recruitment strategy and a social cocoon to retain new members into the group, Tzu Chi emphasizes on an action-oriented

approach of understanding religion. Since members enjoy freedom to choose their religiosity and participation in Tzu Chi's dual-sphere framework, these help to overcome the religious barriers for members who share a divergent worldview from Buddhism.

I have also examined the macro perspective by situating the rise of Buddhism and the syncretic nature of Buddhism in Singapore within the religious marketplace. The growth of Buddhist institutions and popularity of Buddhism is a favourable context which promotes Tzu Chi as an attractive option amidst the array of Buddhist organizations. Syncretism in Buddhism also facilitates religious alternation for the "Buddhists" who view their syncretic practices and Tzu Chi membership as complementary. These factors account for the attractiveness of Tzu Chi and support the diversity in its membership. Despite religious competition, religious alternation suggests that Tzu Chi thrives on an inclusive, multi-religious and multi-ethnic membership. How is it possible that Tzu Chi can align itself strategically with the multi-ethnic and multi-religious population? Tzu Chi appeals to all spectrum of the social strata regardless of age, socio-economic status, education, gender and crosses ethnic and religious boundaries. Tzu chi can be considered as a social religion which incorporates a fundamental basis of Buddhist ideology yet continuously engage with the community and work towards the betterment of social lives of people.

The findings in this study attempts to prompt a review of the dominant sociological concepts of religious conversion, religious affiliation, practice and teachings. With the rise of new religions, spiritual humanism might offer insights as an analytical tool to make sense of the phenomenon of religious change in contemporary society. Spiritual humanism, a combination of spiritual awareness and humanity can be understood through the promotion of social-humanistic values, this-

worldly orientation and engagement with the community, which are without religious- connotations and acceptable to members of other religious groups. The importance and relevance of these values and the significance of its social-humanistic activities surpasses any religious boundaries to differentiate members. These social values, charity and humanitarian missions are considered as universal across religions and new religions attract adherents of different religions who can comprehend spiritual humanism as non-conflicting with religious teachings.

Spiritual humanism in Tzu Chi is evident in its ability to reach out to its members through an emphasis on Buddhism as a this-worldly, socially engaged religion and the promotion of social-humanistic values in Tzu Chi activities and missions. The members' quest for self-identity and self-understanding is part of the project of constructing a global self for global world. With a focus to provide social and welfare services to communities, Tzu Chi's missions of Charity, Medicine, Education and Humanity have a global vision where members are taught to spread "Great Love", an important teaching of Cheng Yen and let their love transcend borders where spiritual humanism can be promoted to impact the social environment on an international scale. In this study on Tzu Chi, I have examined the popularity and growth of Tzu Chi Buddhist Foundation in Singapore. The comparative analysis on Sathya Sai Baba and Soka Gakkai are examples of new religions which serve as additional reference points to understand the influence and attractiveness of spiritual humanism to account for the rise and popularity of new religions in Singapore. With an understanding of spiritual humanism, one can make sense of the persistence of religion in society, how and why religious alternation, religious customisation in Tzu Chi's dual sphere framework are important social processes to understand religious change in Singapore.

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Video Material

Portraits Taiwan: Dharma Master Cheng Yen

Liu Soung – Producer and Director

Produced by Bow Wow Productions in association with the Government Information Office (Republic of China) for Discovery Networks Asia.

List of Plates, Tables, Figures



Plate 1 - Logo of Tzu Chi

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Typology	Religious	Social-Humanistic	Nature of Participation
Group 1 Tzu Chi Buddhist	Only Tzu Chi Buddhism No other religious faith/ affiliation	Primary focus on religion but selected social activities with the aim of practicing or understanding religion.	Only Religious
Group 2A Tzu Chi Buddhist	Tzu Chi Buddhism Taoism Confucianism Mahayana Buddhism Theravada Buddhism Hinduism	All / Selected Tzu Chi social activities	Religious & Social-Humanistic
Group 2B Tzu Chi Member	Christianity & Catholicism ⁱ	All/Selected Tzu Chi social activities	Religious & Social-Humanistic
Group 3 Tzu Chi member	Christianity Catholicism Islam	Selected Tzu Chi social activities	Only Social-Humanistic

Table 1 – Typology of Tzu Chi Membership

(In page 106)

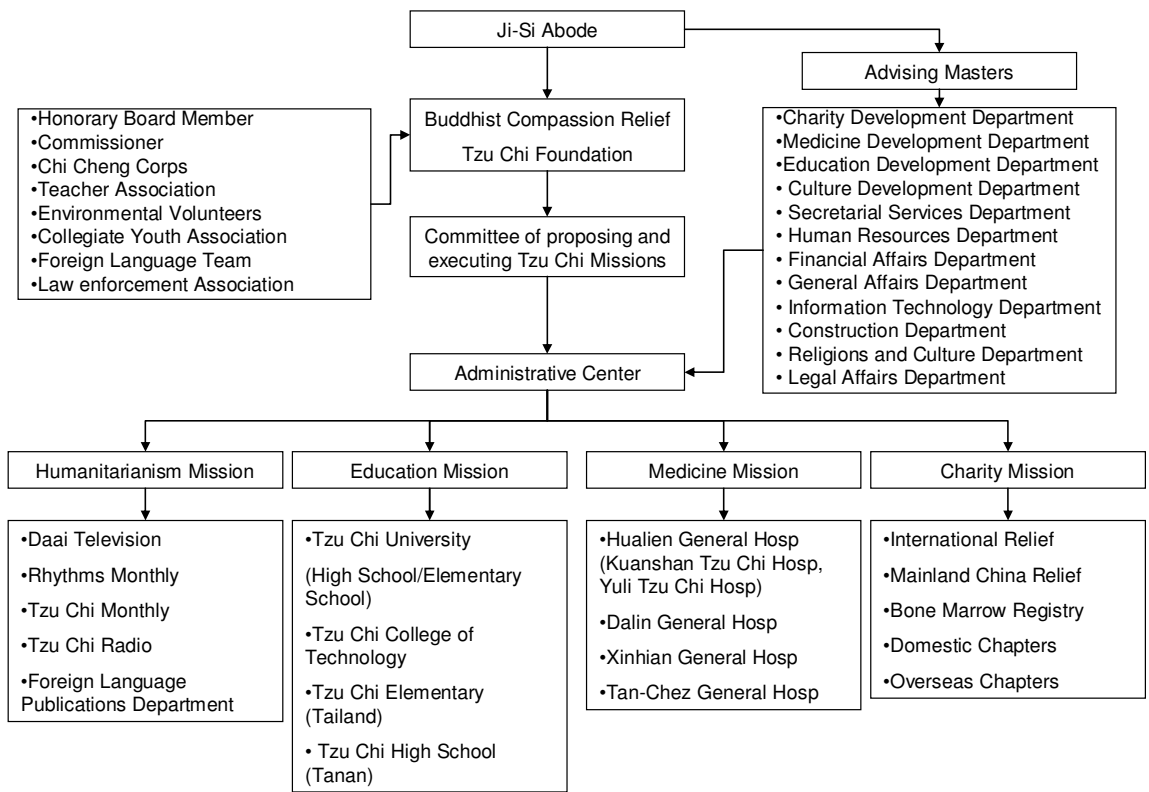


Figure 1 - Organizational Chart of Tzu Chi (Taiwan)

(In Page 125)