

Toward a Pure Land: An Analysis of Shared Stories of Jing Si Abode

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Abstract

Established in 1966 as the Tzu Chi Merits Society by Master Cheng Yen with the support of only 30 housewives, this non-profit organization has over four million supporters worldwide. For more than 30 years, the Tzu Chi organization continues to concentrate its missions and invite all people to join them to purify their minds, pacify society, and work toward a disaster-free world. This study analyzed the culture of Jing Si Abode, the original place of the Tzu Chi organization, which serves as the spiritual and administrative center of the organization. Through the analysis of members' shared stories, a picture of the organization emerges.

Since its establishment in 1966 as the Tzu Chi Merits Society by Master Cheng Yen with the support of only 30 housewives, this non-profit organization today has more than four million supporters worldwide. The global headquarter for the Tzu Chi organization still remains in Hualien, Taiwan. For over 30 years, the Tzu Chi organization continues to concentrate its four missions in charity, medicine, education, and culture with the spirit of sincerity, integrity, trust and honesty (Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation Taiwan, 2004). Members strive to bring forth the pure world that the Tzu Chi organization envisions, a world without suffering and obtained through kindness, compassion, joy, and selfless giving. The organization continues to invite all people to purify their minds, pacify society, and work toward a disaster-free world.

As the original site of the Tzu Chi organization, Jing Si Abode, located in the suburb of Hualien City, and serving as the spiritual and administrative center of the organization deserves academic investigation because of its influence on the development of the Tzu Chi organization. Aiming to understand the organization, this study focused on Jing Si Abode from the perspective of organizational culture.

Review of Literature

According to Deal and Kennedy (1976), four perspectives help in understanding an organizational culture, including its values, heroes, rituals/rites, and patterns of communication. Values refer to the worldview or shared views and beliefs of organizational members. Through its values, an organization develops direction in its operation. Values as well provide guidance for members' attitude and pace in various actions. Heroes are people who reflect organizational values. They are not only key figures in defining organizational enemies or friends, but they are also decision-makers who determine rewards and punishments. During ritual activities in an organization, heroes are always present. Rituals

and rites function to give organizational members an opportunity to celebrate and enhance their values and beliefs, to glorify their heroes, and to share the future prospects of the organization. Finally, patterns of communication, which refer to informal channels of interaction among members in an organization, can be especially influential in shaping members' perceptions of organizational reality and educating them in preferable organizational attitudes and behavior.

In addition to the four perspectives proposed by Deal and Kennedy, more and more scholars have pointed out that examining symbols shared by members is another effective approach for discerning organizational culture (Bantz, 1993; Bormann, 1985; Eisenberg & Riley, 2001; Martin, 2002; Scheibel, 1990). For instance, Scheibel (1990) noted that metaphors, fantasy themes, and stories are "the symbolic triad" of organizational life. These three kinds of symbols usually appear and interact simultaneously.

These symbols appear in messages and are built into the vocabulary, themes, and structure of messages. As Lakoff and Johnson noted (1980), the essence of a metaphor is to experience and understand one thing through another. In organizational communication, metaphors often provide valuable information about the social construction of organizational members, task, and play. Organizational expectations and meanings can be also better understood through the analysis of metaphors.

Fantasy themes are dramatic messages regarding people, behavior, and events in different spaces and time (Bormann, 1985). Bormann's symbolic convergence theory points that, through shared fantasy themes, the symbolic world of group members converges, following which the symbolic reality of the group emerges. In other words, group members develop a common view toward linguistic and symbolic expressions. This common view is reflected in the discourse of the reality in members' past, as well as their hopes for the future. Hence, fantasy themes remove one from the here and now. They are like a day dream, a representation of what has happened or what might happen in an organization.

As to stories about individual members, among members, and the organization itself, they mirror the social reality of the organization. Story sharing or storytelling is a kind of cultural performance that contributes to creating the experience of personal or organization life (Conquergood, 1983). Storytelling helps to focus and clarify reality. Through the sharing and transmitting of stories, members in an organization are more apt to endure the process of socialization and enculturation in order to become real members of the organization (Louise, 1980; Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1983). In addition, storytelling presents the political aspect of the organization and is an important part of conveying and learning ropes and rules between old and new members (Martin, 2002; Schwartzman, 1983). Hence, the collective process of story sharing and story construction among organizational members functions to manifest organizational culture in ways that can be viewed from multiple perspectives.

There are numerous studies targeting the Tzu Chi organization. Among them, up to 2002, thirty eight theses can be found (*Li nian lai Tzu Chi xiang guan lun wen*, 2004). In addition, much more scholarly (e.g., Ding, 1999a, 1999b; Huang, 1995) and non-scholarly work (e.g., H. J. Chen, 1998; R. X. Chen, 1996; Qiu, 1996; You, 1996) has contributed to the study of the Tzu Chi organization.

Although scholarly research dealing with the Tzu Chi organization focuses mainly on its organizational structure, social action, and management and leadership, a few studies have examined Tzu Chi from the perspective of organizational culture. For example, He (1992) explored the organizational culture and its expressive forms and found that the cardinal

goal of establishing the Tzu Chi Buddhist General Hospital was to enhance the Buddhist ideal on helping needy people; thus, all the elements, such as materialistic symbols, language, stories, and rituals used to indicate the organizational culture, embody this theme.

Peng (1994) analyzed the organizational symbols of the Tzu Chi Merits Society from the perspectives of vocabulary, action, and material used to present observable cultural phenomena of the group. The author reported that members of the Tzu Chi Merits Society, by continuously participating, learning, and self-reflecting on the basis of Tzu Chi's teachings, began to purify their minds and, in turn, the meaning of their lives. This purification process leads members of the group to construct a set of meaning and goal-oriented organizational symbols and behaviors.

Wu (1995) compared three organizations in Taiwan, including the World Vision Taiwan, the Tzu Chi Merits Society, and the Chinese United Way in terms of their views concerning welfare, decision-making processes, and the use of symbols. The author found that, in regard to the use of symbols, the Tzu Chi Merits Society uses religious symbols to represent the spirit, belief, and history of the Tzu Chi organization, and further uses these symbols to achieve cohesion among members, as well to transmit Tzu Chi's ideal, so that social trust can be gained and social capital can be mobilized. In addition, those religious symbols used in the Tzu Chi Merits Society included the concept of "Merit" itself, heroes like "Master Cheng Yen" and "Master Yin Shun," the organization's names, such as "Tzu Chi" and "Merits Society," and materialistic symbols, such as the "architecture" of Jing Si Abode and the "General Hospital" of Tzu Chi.

Liu (1993) employed the fantasy theme approach to analyze the discourse of the Tzu Chi organization. Based on the analysis of Master Cheng Yen's work, Liu determined that the worldview of Tzu Chi's members is constructed by two types of fantasy themes: "the sacred" and "the profane." "The sacred" leads Tzu Chi's members to live in the context formed by "Bodhisattva Group" fantasy theme, which is filled with ideas of love, redemption, and the like. This fantasy theme gives Tzu Chi's members a basis for justifying their humanitarian actions toward needy persons. "The profane" fantasy theme refers to the concern and consideration of different aspects of daily life. The sacred and profane fantasy themes successfully integrate the spiritual and practical aspects of Tzu Chi's members' lives.

The preceding review suggests that although abundant research has been devoted to studying the Tzu Chi organization, only a few explorations have conducted from the perspective of organizational culture. Moreover, among those studies on Tzu Chi's organizational culture, few have directly dealt with the subject from the aspect of how symbols are used. Except for Liu's study of fantasy themes, the other two aspects of "the symbolic triad," i.e., metaphors and stories, are completely lacking. The purpose of this study was to fill this void by analyzing shared stories among members of Jing Si Abode so that the organizational culture of the Abode could be illuminated.

Method

Procedure

To unravel the culture of the Tzu Chi organization based in Jing Si Abode, in-depth interviews provided the data. The study took place in March, 2004. Shared stories were collected from a Master, the director of religion office, and a staff in Jing Si Abode. Average time for interviewing each person is about 4 hours. In total, 32 stories were collected. Excluding redundant ones, the study involved 23 shared stories. Some shared stories as well

appear in Tzu Chi related publications (e.g., Pan, 2004; Zhang, 2004). Among these stories, number 23 contains a series of short ones. Appendix 1 provides a complete list.

Data Analysis

According to Bantz (1993), as a symbolic form, shared stories tend to be easier to collect compared to metaphors and fantasy themes. There are various types of organizational stories, including personal, collegial, and corporate stories. Moreover, the analysis of stories can take many forms. For example, in a broad sense, the analysis of fantasy themes can also be counted as a kind of stories analysis. Another approach is to identify organizational rituals, passion, sociality, politics, and enculturation through the analysis of shared stories (Bantz, 1993; Boje, 1991; Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1983).

Stories involving organizational rituals include descriptions of both implementation and violations. The shared stories of rituals about heroes, villains, organizational values, and achievements can help one understand an entire organizational culture.

Stories dealing with passion refer to the depiction of the involvement or withdrawal of individual members, among members, or the organization as a whole in regard to the expression of feelings. The degree of emotional involvement mirrors the intensity of cohesiveness or lack of commitment of organizational members.

Stories of sociality include jokes, gossip, rumors, grievances, and grumbling about the organization. The sharing process of these stories can reflect the nature and characteristics of the organization.

Stories relating to politics refer to personal ability, solidarity of group members or other closed alliances, and negotiation processes. Finally, stories reflecting enculturation broadly depict how new members learn the rules and ropes in becoming members of an organization.

The combination of these five aspects of shared stories can provide a more comprehensive picture of organizational culture and, in turn, a more systematic way for people to understand an organization.

From a consideration of these five aspects of shared stories, the present study led to such a picture of the culture of the Tzu Chi organization in Jing Si Abode.

Results

From the analyses, we found that the 23 shared stories not only reflected various types, including personal, collegial, and corporate indicated by Bantz, but also more or less the five aspects of organizational culture mentioned at the outset: rituals, passion, sociality, politics, and enculturation.

Given the nature of the content, the collected shared stories mainly could be classified into six non-mutually exclusive categories: Stories about Master Cheng Yen (the founder of the organization) (stories #1, 6, 7), stories about teachings of the Master to the followers (#1, 5, 9), stories about the development of the Tzu Chi organization (#1, 2, 3, 4, 11, 12), stories about members in Jing Si Abode (#10, 19, 20, 21, 23), stories about the sentient myriad (#13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18), and stories emphasizing the heart of tending merit (*xi fu*) (#8, 9, 22). The five aspects of organizational culture were also reflected in these categories of collected shared stories. The following discussion concerns representative stories related to these five aspects of organizational culture.

Rituals

Rituals play a major part especially in religious organizations. There is no exception to Jing Si Abode, because it is a Buddhist group. The most evident shared story collected in this study about rituals was “The Red Envelope of Merit and Wisdom” (#9). The ritual is held in every Chinese Lunar New Year and has become a tradition of the Tzu Chi organization. In the ritual, Master Cheng Yen distributes red envelopes, each containing a gift purchased from royalties of her book publications of the year, to members of the organization in an end-of-the-year celebration gathering.

For example, in 1993, the Master prepared for every participating member two red envelopes. One contained six five-dollar coins symbolizing the six Paramitars: Dana (almsgiving or generosity), Sila (morality or the observation of precepts), Virya (zeal and progress), Kshanti (patience under insult), Dhyana (meditation), and Prajna (wisdom). In addition, the total thirty dollars symbolize the three ways of excluding Asravas (taints): Sila, Dhyana, and Prajna. The other envelope, containing grains, symbolized “harvesting the five grains”: “Pearl barley” representing sincerity; “lotus” representing heart connection; “peanut” representing rooting into the ground with merit and wisdom; “almond” representing happiness; and “red bean” representing auspiciousness and caring.

Another story “Coins in Bamboo Tubes” (#11) had the most significant meaning to the organization, which led to the development of Jing Si Abode into a worldwide Tzu Chi Foundation. The story indicates that when the Tzu Chi Merits Society first formed in 1966, Master Cheng Yen made thirty bamboo tubes for her thirty followers and encouraged them to put fifty cents into the tube before they went out shopping for foods in market every day. This ritual for saving tiny fifty cents daily served to foster the awareness of helping needy people. The practice is like a drop of water moving incessantly and eventually flooding into a huge running river that extends the soul of the Tzu Chi organization.

Passion

Stories concerning passion dealt with members’ feeling toward the organization. The most important story collected in this study regarding passion was “A Swamp of Blood” (#3), which tells of the first step of Master Cheng Yen’s movement in helping poor and needy people. In 1966, when Master Cheng Yen saw a swamp of blood on the floor of a clinic and was told that it was from a pregnant woman who was carried out of the clinic (and died later) due to her inability to pay the security deposit fee, she determined in her mind not to let this kind of incident happen again by improving the backward medical environment. The Tzu Chi Merits Society was then founded in the same year due to the impetus of the incident.

The story of “Master De Ci” (#20) describes the first disciple of Master Cheng Yen. Master De Ci began to follow Master Cheng Yen faithfully from the early years to the present. She has shared major responsibilities in building the Tzu Chi organization. More than 70 years old now, she has transformed herself from a reticent nun to a good storyteller sharing the stories of Tzu Chi organization with followers on daily basis.

Story 23 contains several portraits of Tzu Chi members who demonstrated strong passion and commitment towards the organization. For example, Mrs. Chen (#23a) recounted the harsh condition of the group 20 years ago, but when she heard Master Cheng Yen said, “I neither have money nor might, but I still have a life” to help needy people, she pushed hard herself forward no matter what frustration or difficulties she faced. Now she is a very old member, but she is still a talking book disseminating the history of the Tzu Chi organization.

As to Mrs. Zhang (#23b), a 101-year-old member, she began to be involved in Tzu Chi's environmental protection program when she was 90 years old. "Why you are still doing this in this old age?" people asked. "I am working on merit (*xi fu*)." Her efforts and firm conviction to the spirit of Cheng Yen's teachings resulted in motivating the whole village to launch a movement of environmental protection.

Sociality

Stories involving sociality are disclosed through interaction that reflects the social aspects of the organization. Numbers 23c, 23d, 23e, and 23f are ones fitting this category. For example, one of the most common rumors about the Tzu Chi organization concerns the requirements for being able to wear the Tzu Chi uniform (#23c). People often said, "It's said that one must donate a million dollars to be allowed to wear Tzu Chi uniform. Is this true?" The answer for the question is "those caring people who regularly donate five or ten dollars are all members of Tzu Chi organization."

In 1977, Master Cheng Yen and her followers went to south Taiwan to offer charity to those victims from the impact of a strong typhoon (#23d). They went to local government office to request the list of victims but were asked to wait. After waiting and waiting due to the lack of effectiveness and sincerity of the local officials, one of the members inquired "Master, we come to help not come to beg, why we are treated so meanly." The Master answered, "We come to offer charity voluntarily rather than being invited. We ought to be patient and meek."

Another story (#23e) is about a new member of one of the Tzu Chi groups kept complaining and nagging the other 20 members. One day, these members went to see a senior member describing the problem and were told, "Since you all know her problem, you have to bear with her. You are healthy people, the only way to solve the problem is to love her. It is difficult for her alone to love all you 20 persons, but not vice versa. We should follow the Master's teaching of compassion and inclusiveness to help her grow."

Politics

Stories concerning politics show personal strength, cementing allies, and bargaining. In the same year of "A Swamp of Blood" (#3) incident, three Catholic nuns visited Master Cheng Yen (#1) and discussed beliefs in different religions. They raised a question before leaving, "We finally understand that the compassion of Buddha is pervasive in all beings. It is really great, however, Catholic-built churches, hospitals, and nursing homes, but what did Buddhists do?" This powerful question pounding Master Cheng Yen becomes an impetus for the Master to form an organization and build hospitals to provide services for the needy.

"The Small Cultivating Wooden House" (#7) addresses the personal strength of Master Cheng Yen. In 1963, Master Cheng Yen returned to Hualien after completing the 32-day Perfect Commandments trainings. She began to cite and study the *Lotus Sutra* on daily basis and wrote down the entire *Lotus Sutra* once a month. She only allowed herself to sleep two hours a night in this ascetic life. She followed the Bai Zhang Zen Master's principle of "One day no work, one day no food" and determined not to solicit alms or hold monastic assembly to collect foods or money to help the group survive.

"The Tearless Candle" (#8) as well shows the strength of and a way to solidify the relationship with followers and making *yuan*, or connection with others. The candles made in Jing Si Abode are named "the tearless candles" and are different from the traditional ones

having the melting wax drop down. In 1981, Master Cheng Yen improved this tearing style and made the entire candle burn to the end in a small container. Mass production of the tearless candles at Jing Si Abode began in 1982 and became a main source of Abode's income.

Enculturation

Stories relating to enculturation show a way to become a member of an organization. "An Indented Cup" (#5) is about a member who prepared a cup of tea for Master Cheng Yen and found that there was an indentation on the cup. She apologized to the Master for the imperfect cup. The Master replied, "If you ignore the indentation, the whole cup is still a round and complete one. This is like that every human being will have shortcoming, but so long as we don't focus on that defect, s/he is a good person."

In "Sister Jia Yun" (#21), Jia Yun is an employee in Jing Si Abode, who always considered herself a nice person, because she was polite and offered help to those needing it in daily life. While she felt content for herself, one day she read a sentence in Master Cheng Yen's book, "No matter how good a person is, so long as s/he doesn't have a good or humble tongue, s/he will not be a good person." The experience taught her the importance of integrating speech and action.

Finally, "Da Bao" (#13), the name of a deserted dog adopted by members in Jing Si Abode, became a vegetarian too in the Abode after living there for a while. However, one day Da Bao rushed to a bone in front of him. The Master saw this and reprimanded him, "You are a dog in the present life, do you still want to be a dog in the next life too?" Da Bao immediately dropped the bone. In different charity occasions Da Bao was a big helper too. After the story was broadcast by the Tzu Chi Da Ai television station, Da Bao was blessed by the audience to be a little bodhisattva. In response, the Master said, "Not only human beings, but all myriads do have love and spirit and provide us valuable lessons for learning." Stories #14-16 are all about valuable lessons from animals and plants.

Discussion and Conclusion

As previous scholarship has revealed, the process of story sharing can clearly reflect the culture of an organization. The analyses of shared stories based on rituals, passion, sociality, politics, and enculturation in this study provide a framework of understanding the organizational culture of Jing Si Abode. Overall, the results present a picture of what the Master Cheng Yen was pursuing, through the establishment of Jing Si Abode in 1966, the spirit of Buddhism from two perspectives.

Internally, the Abode's culture emphasizes self-cultivation based on four elements: sincerity, integrity, trust, and honesty. The internal cultivation and refinement is the fundamental guideline for social interaction of the members of the Tzu Chi organization and forms the foundation of Tzu Chi's spirit. Sincerity refers to treating others with a genuine and faithful heart; integrity refers to dealing with them in a spirit of fairness and justice; trust refers to a faith in each other in interaction; and honesty refers to being a real or open person (Pan, 2004; Zhang, 2004).

Externally, the Abode's culture demands the implementation of four cardinal beliefs: kindness (*ci*), compassion (*bei*), joy (*xi*), and giving (*she*). These beliefs represent "the four kinds of boundless mind" that are the essence of Buddhism and manifest the practical aspect of Tzu Chi's social involvement. Kindness resonates Tzu Chi's first mission "charity" which means "joy giving." It aims to distribute kindness to every corner of the world without any

regret. Compassion resonates Tzu Chi's second mission "medicine" which means "suffering release." It aims to universalize medical services without any complaint. Joy resonates Tzu Chi's third mission "culture" which refers to a peaceful mind imbedded in the right law. It aims to root deeply the culture without any worry. Finally, giving resonates Tzu Chi's fourth mission "education," referring to "sacrificing." It aims to provide a comprehensive education with a spirit of great sacrifice without asking for any returns (Pan, 2004; Zhang, 2004).

Cultivating sincerity, integrity, trust, and honesty within and implementing kindness, compassion, joy, and giving without form a crystallized circle of Tzu Chi's ideal, which originated from Buddhist teachings, and they are clearly reflected in the stories shared by members of Jing Si Abode.

In addition to reflecting the organizational culture of Jing Si Abode, two more issues need to be pointed out regarding this study. First, it is not clear that a shared story reflects only the aspects of organizational culture used in the analyses. For example, story #1 not only demonstrates the political aspect of organizational culture, but also serves as a short history of the Tzu Chi organization.

Second, the content of the stories collected for this study tends to be positive, which mirrors the great endeavor of the Tzu Chi's organization toward the four missions. However, although the stories do not offer a distorted picture of the organization, they do not provide a complete one. For example, during the period of study, I had opportunity to interact with local people and discovered that while the Tzu Chi organization has developed into a global network with a great reputation for its contributions to the needy, a gap of perception between the Tzu Chi organization and local community still exists. Responding to the local community's expectations by the Tzu Chi organization is not satisfactory in the eyes of some local residents. There is a potential need for the Tzu Chi organization to improve the relationship with the local community through a better strategy of public relations. Unfortunately, this kind of problem usually is not reflected in members' shared stories concerning the organization.

In sum, the performance of story telling is a process of creating and mirroring the social reality of an organization, and through shared stories of members an organizational culture can be drawn. However, the analysis of shared stories represents only a way of demystifying organizational culture from the symbolic perspective, future research should compare and integrate results from different approaches so that a more reliable and complete culture of the Tzu Chi organization can be delineated.

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Appendix 1 — A List of Collected Shared Stories

1. The Origination – Master Cheng Yen and Jing Si Abode
2. Jing Si Abode
3. A Swamp of Blood
4. Pu Ming Temple
5. An Indented Cup
6. Master's Food
7. The Small Cultivating Wooden House
8. Tearless Candle
9. The Red Envelop of Merit and Wisdom
10. Master's Mom
11. Coins in Bamboo Tubes
12. The Architecture of Jing Si Abode
13. Da Bao: The Dog in the Abode
14. Shan Lai and Xiu Xiu: The Cats in the Abode
15. The Cobra in the Abode
16. Talk to the Snake in the Abode
17. Banyan Trees
18. Qi Li Xiang
19. Statues of the Nun (Jin Bi) and Little Monks
20. Master De Ci
21. Sister Jia Yun
22. The Bamboo House (Zhu Xuan)
23. Stories About Committee Members
 - a. Mrs. Chen
 - b. Mrs. Zhang
 - c. Tzu Chi Uniform
 - d. Typhoon and the Local Government
 - e. A New Member