

National Recognition of a Religious Festival:

Comparing Buddha's Birthday Celebration Organized in Taipei to the Northern Wei Buddha's Birthday Parade

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Festivals make up a major feature of all religions¹⁾ and human societies.²⁾ A festival means to most people a “special day or period, usually in memory of a religious event, with its own social activities, food and ceremonies,” or an “organized set of special events, such as musical performances.”³⁾ A religious festival presents a unique opportunity to gain insight into the confluence of religion, culture, and politics. Among Buddhist festivals, Buddha's birthday stands out as the most popular and most public. When religious celebrations go outside the temple gates, it is an indication of wide acceptance of Buddhism by its host populace. In this paper, I shall compare two significant Buddha's birthday celebrations: one in antiquity and one in recent times. These two circumstances are significant because the heads of state are conspicuously present outside their symbols of power and the entire capital city observed the occasion. By comparing large-scale commemoration of Buddha's birthday celebrations held before the Office of the President in contemporary Taipei with a city-wide parade held in Luoyang during the Northern Wei Dynasty (386–534), this paper will identify the factors critical to indigenous Chinese people accepting major festivals of a foreign religion.

Background

Buddha's birthday festival is the oldest international and extant celebration of the birth of a historical figure. This celebration grew out of necessity. When Buddhism moved out of its land of origin, one of the first things that missionaries needed to do was to establish the identity of their religion's founder. Through a process of social, cultural, and literary “domestication,” missionaries transmitted foreign texts and practices to a Chinese audience after the turn of the Common Era. The most public form of “teaching” about the Buddha would be the Buddha's birthday parade.

One of the largest ancient Buddha's birthday parade occurred between 500 and 528 dur-

ing the Northern Wei Dynasty. The people of Luoyang, both indigenous Chinese and their foreign conquerors, held citywide parades on the eighth day of the fourth lunar month involving the emperor of Tuoba 拓跋 Wei descent. According to the *Luoyang qielan ji* 洛陽伽藍記 (*A record of Buddhist monasteries in Lo-yang*), participants and spectators, of both indigenous and foreign ethnicities, partook in chants, variety shows, and spectacular image processions that had evolved over at least three hundred years in the nation. The emperor made flower offerings to over 1,000 Buddha images as they paraded through his palace. This megaevent took place about 500 years after what might be considered the official entry of Buddhism into China (when Emperor Ming 明 of the Han Dynasty commissioned the White Horse monastery, China's first Buddhist temple).

When Chinese monastics carried Buddhism to other parts of Asia, they continued the tradition of their forefathers by “exporting” festivities to their new places of abode. Taiwan was one such recipient. Daoism was accepted by Taiwan residents before Buddhism. Although information about Buddhism in Taiwan became widely known during the Qing Dynasty (1616–1911), it was only after many Buddhist monks and nuns from the Chinese eastern seaboard entered the island in 1945⁴⁾ that Buddhism in Taiwan took shape. One such monk was Hsing Yun who became the driving force behind national recognition of Buddha's birthday as a day of observance and annual Buddha's birthday celebrations held before the Office of the President, just about 500 years after Buddhism's entry into Taiwan. The milestones were national observance of Buddha's birthday declared in 1999 and celebrations on the Ketagalan Boulevard involving over 100,000 members of the public in Taipei in 2008.

Supply Side: Buddhist Organizational and Negotiation Skills

To identify the factors leading to effective public staging of a religion's major festival, I propose to analyse both the supply of appropriately-skilled Buddhists and demand of government and public. In both the Northern Wei and Taiwanese instances, Buddhists demonstrated their ability to stage megaevents safely in public spaces through years of successful experience. According to the *Weishu* 魏書 (Book of Wei), the first three emperors (386–451) of the Northern Wei Dynasty “on the eighth day of the fourth month . . . used to mount the Buddha images on carriages and march them through the wide streets. The Emperor would personally drive to the gate tower and watch; he would scatter flowers and

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thus perform acts of veneration.”⁵⁾ The Buddhist temples of the time had demonstrated their ability to organize Buddha’s birthday parades to the satisfaction of the emperors. These rituals took place in the former capital of Pingcheng and continued in the new capital of Luoyang on a much grander scale by Emperor Xuanwu 宣武 (r. 500–515), a testimonial to the Buddhists’ organizational skills accumulated over the years.

While many Buddhist temples were involved in the citywide parades in the Northern Wei celebrations, the Taiwanese example was staged by two affiliated organizations, Fo Guang Shan and Buddha’s Light International Association. Their founder, Hsing Yun, was no stranger to taking the Buddha into public spaces. He started his Dharma promotion activities in Ilan (in north-eastern Taiwan) in 1954. At a time when such commemorative events were mainly held within temple grounds, Master Hsing Yun started citywide procession of the Buddha image in 1958. That year, 30,000 people in this city that had a total population of 50,000 participated in a Buddha’s Birthday parade stretching 10 kilometres. Besides engaging two-thirds of the city’s population only four years after his arrival, Hsing Yun also invited students to parade with triangular flags while families transformed their carts into decorated floats in celebration. When placed in the context that such public display and participation occurred under martial law (instituted island-wide between 1949 and 1987), this parade was a bold statement by a young Buddhist monk (then only 31 years of age). In 2010, President Ma Ying-Jeou openly praised Buddhists for their secularisation, entrepreneurial spirit and volunteerism as well as their organizational skills, productivity and ability to engage the masses.⁶⁾

Besides having a tradition of success, acculturation was also an important consideration. For example, in medieval China, image procession was a novelty popularised by Buddhism. Buddhists rode on the Chinese custom of imperial, cultural and funerary processions and the general public’s fascination with variety shows. The Tuoba Wei people were also familiar with revelries involving music and dance. Hence, the popular parades of Luoyang were based on a paradigm common to both the indigenous Chinese and their steppe conquerors.⁷⁾

By the time of modern Taiwan, the mode of celebration and the idea of public celebration of birthdays were no longer a novelty. However, public recognition of the status of a religious festival was an issue. The Taiwanese government only accepted Buddha’s birthday as a nationally-recognised day of observance in 1999 although Hsing Yun wrote in

protest against the partial treatment of Buddha's birthday compared to Christmas (which was already declared a public day of observance) since 1957. When a petition bearing 146,000 signatures was passed by 207 legislators,⁸⁾ Buddha's birthday finally joined the birthdays of Earth God, Guan Yin, God of Medicine, Mazu, Guan Gong, Chen Huang, Sun Yatsen as well as Jesus (Christmas)⁹⁾ to become a day of national observance.

Obtaining national and public recognition was an important measure of success. A tradition of mature skills at coordinating similar public events helped assure the ruler or government that national-level display of devotional fervour could be conducted in a safe and orderly manner. Besides large-scale festival organizational expertise, Buddhists also required skilful means to negotiate various cultural and political hurdles to acculturate with existing models. The Northern Wei Buddhists and their predecessors built on existing paradigms while Hsing Yun and contemporary Buddhists campaigned for equality of religious treatment.

Demand Side: Religious Merit and Nation-wide Display of Solidarity

The heads of nation were a visible part of the religious event in both instances under study. The Northern Wei Emperor scattered flowers outside the Ch'ang-ho palace¹⁰⁾ while President Ma Ying-Jeou prayed for national prosperity in front of the Office of the President.¹¹⁾ It was noted that during the time of the parade in the Northern Wei Dynasty, "the nation liked to pray for happiness."¹²⁾ In 2010, President Ma urged the nation to practise the Three Acts of Goodness (doing good deeds, speaking good words and thinking good thoughts) and Five Harmonies (being kind to oneself, sensitive to one's family, generous to friends, devoted to social harmony and committed to world peace). Taiwanese Vice President Vincent Siew supported Master Hsing Yun's promotion of these values by urging the public to practise these values to make the world a better place during the Buddha's birthday celebration of 2011.¹³⁾ Not only the head of state, but also the citizens made offerings before the Buddha. Religious merit was an obvious reason for the public gathering.

At a time when there was imminent danger of garrison uprising in the Northern Wei, the staging of a procession of apparent power and wealth held political significance. Over a thousand Buddha images paraded towards the emperor to receive flower offerings spoke of celestial endorsement and warned off any rebellions.¹⁴⁾ Hsing Yun's orchestration of annual Buddha's birthday parades during the turn of the millennium presents an interesting parallel.

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To relieve tense relationships between China and Taiwan, a Chinese import was peacefully organized before the Taiwanese government's symbolic headquarters. Speeches delivered during these annual occasions often highlighted the need for social harmony and world peace. The well-organized event was a national display of cohesion.

The presence of Buddha images, traditional rituals and chanting, entertaining performances as well as religious and political representatives from around the world signified how a religious festival could galvanise a nation and bring about social harmony through cultural activities. The Buddha's birthday celebrations brought together an individual's wish for religious merit and a nation's display of solidarity annually.

Conclusion

The study of two significant Buddha's birthday celebrations separated by 1,500 years revealed some important considerations for a foreign religion to become sufficiently acculturated for national recognition. A measure of success was the presence of head of state in public support of a major religious festival. This paper identified four important factors for this to take place. Buddhists needed to demonstrate a tradition of success in staging large-scale events publicly. Another important consideration was the skilful means exercised by influential Buddhists to hybridise the elements of the commemoration activities or justify the public observance of the festival. Also vital was the requirement for such large-scale displays in capital cities. Hence, the third contributing factor was the participants' need for Buddhist merit, especially in populous cities. Finally were political circumstances, such as tense situations, that led to the need to unite the nation as well as to demonstrate leadership ability. In summary, the leadership of Buddhist trailblazers and organizations, coupled with political and community needs, helped to raise the profile of Buddhism and Buddhists worldwide through impressive Buddha's birthday celebrations in public spaces.

1) Nikki R. Keddie, *Iran: Religion, Politics, and Society: Collected Essays* (London: F. Cass, 1980), 108.

2) Eric O. Ayisi, *An Introduction to the Study of African Culture* (Nairobi: East African Publishers, 1992), 82.

3) *Cambridge Dictionary Online*, s.v. "Festival," accessed August 1, 2011, <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/festival?q=festival>.

4) Charles Brewer Jones, *Buddhism in Taiwan Religion and the State, 1660–1990* (Honolulu: Uni-

versity of Hawai'i Press, 1999), 105, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=39129>.

5) Wei Shou, *Treatise on Buddhism and Taoism: An English Translation of the Original Chinese Text of Wei-Shu CXIV and the Japanese Annotation of Tsukamoto Zenryu*, trans. Leon Hurvitz (Kyoto: Jimbunkagaku Kenkyusho, Kyoto University, 1956), 56.

6) "President Ma Attends Buddha's Birthday Celebration: Prays for National Harmony," *Broadcasting Corporation of China*, May 9, 2010, <http://www.bcc.com.tw/news/newsview.asp?cde=1121843>.

7) Shi Juewei, *Parading the Buddha: Localizing Buddha's Birthday Celebrations* (Hacienda Heights, CA: Buddha's Light Publishing, 2013), 50.

8) Ko Shu-ling, "Sakyamuni Buddha Birthday Celebrated," *Taipei Times*, May 9, 2011, <http://www.taipetimes.com/News/front/archives/2011/05/09/2003502765>.

9) "Holidays and Observances in Taiwan in 2000," *Time and Date*, accessed December 17, 2014, <http://www.timeanddate.com/holidays/taiwan/2000>.

10) Yang Hsüan-chih, *A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Lo-Yang*, trans. Yi-t'ung Wang (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 126–127.

11) "Buddha's Birthday and Mother's Day: President Ma and Venerable Master Hsing Yun Promote Three Acts of Goodness," *New Wave*, May 8, 2011.

12) Yang, *A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Lo-Yang*, 126–127.

13) Ko, "Sakyamuni Buddha Birthday Celebrated."

14) Shi, *Parading the Buddha: Localizing Buddha's Birthday Celebrations*, 113.

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