



## Toward a Modern Buddhist Hagiography Telling the Life of Hsing Yun in Popular Media

Hsing Yun (Xingyun, 1927–), the founder of Fo Guang Shan, is one of the most influential Buddhist monks in Taiwan and around the world. This study examines the biographies of Hsing Yun as depicted in Fo Guang Shan's popular media—a comic, an online photo album, a documentary, and a music video—to elucidate the uses and significance of Buddhist hagiography in contemporary Taiwan. I argue that unlike the Buddhist hagiographies of earlier times in which eminent monks were depicted as transcendental beings with superhuman powers and spiritual attainments, the informal and intimate portrayals of Hsing Yun in popular media seek to portray the monk as a worldly bodhisattva in the this-worldly realm. Focusing on the narration of Hsing Yun's life story in these popular works, this article seeks to shed new light on the use of popular media by Buddhist organizations and to develop a new understanding of how Buddhist hagiographies are produced in an accessible and fascinating manner for contemporary audiences.

KEYWORDS: Buddhist hagiography—Fo Guang Shan—Hsing Yun—popular media—humanistic Buddhism

In my own life, I have done my utmost to promote humanistic Buddhism. When I lecture on the sutras, I want everyone to understand; when I write articles, I want them to be accessible to everyone; in establishing temples, I want people to be able to use them; in organizing Dharma services, I want everyone to experience Dharma joy; and in propagating Buddhism overseas, I insist upon translation resources. I try to meet the needs of the people, whatever the time and place. This is because the Buddhism that people need is practical Buddhism.

(HSING YUN 2008, 160)

MY INTEREST in the biography of Master Hsing Yun (Xingyun 星雲, 1927–) began when I co-taught the “Buddhism in Asia” summer program in 2009\* and visited the Fo Guang Shan (佛光山; Wade-Giles: Fo Kuang Shan, literally “Buddha’s Light Mountain”) headquarters in Kaohsiung (Gaoxiung 高雄) and a branch temple in Ilan (Yilan 宜蘭).<sup>1</sup> My college students and I were rather impressed with the scale of the monastery in Kaohsiung and the global reach of its branches (FO GUANG SHAN 2011).<sup>2</sup> However, what intrigued me the most was our visit to the Fo Guang Shan Museum located in the Ilan branch temple. At the museum, our guides, who were nuns from the temple, showed us an illustrated comic biography of Hsing Yun, the founder of Fo Guang Shan. They told us stories, which are illustrated in the comic book, about their master’s arrival in Taiwan, the difficulties he encountered in his early religious career, and his successful missionary activities. Reading this comic helped me understand Hsing Yun’s leadership and the influence he has over his disciples and devotees. Following this, I started to consider the possibility of studying the life of Hsing Yun as portrayed in popular media and, with the help of some friends, began to track down the biographies of the monk as presented in various media.

Fo Guang Shan—one of the largest and probably most influential Buddhist organizations in Taiwan—and its founder Hsing Yun have been the subject of several monographs. Charles Brewer Jones highlights the rise of Fo Guang Shan in the period of religious pluralization in Taiwan in the late 1980s, which led to the multiplying of numerous Buddhist temples and organizations. He regards Fo Guang Shan as a new form of “Chinese Buddhist sectarianism” that has two aspects: “the rationalization and standardization of Buddhist life and practice, and the articulation of religious beliefs and values that inspire this life and that these practices

enact” (JONES 1999, 191). Hsing Yun’s “personal energy and charisma,” as Jones (198) argues, allowed Fo Guang Shan to grow very rapidly during the period of pluralization in Taiwan. Stuart CHANDLER (2004) examines Fo Guang Shan in the light of global studies and contends that cultural factors, specifically religious beliefs and practices as in the case of Fo Guang Shan, foster patterns of behavior conducive to capitalist enterprise. He also demonstrates the many roles that Hsing Yun assumes as the leader of Fo Guang Shan: wise teacher, stern father, caring mother, doting grandfather, or compassionate bodhisattva (CHANDLER 2004, 32–42). Man Yee (Manyi), a disciple of Hsing Yun, probes into the master’s model of “humanistic Buddhism” (*renjian fojiao* 人間佛教). She demonstrates how Hsing Yun’s progressive ideas have reformed the traditional image of Chinese Buddhism and modernized the propagation of the religion in recent times. This has enabled Fo Guang Shan to develop from a local Taiwanese temple into a global Buddhist mission (MANYI 2005). Richard Madsen looks at four major religious organizations—Tzu Chi (Ciji 慈濟), Fo Guang Shan, Dharma Drum Mountain (Fagu Shan 法鼓山), and Enacting Heaven Temple (Xingtian Gong 行天宮)—in the context of Taiwan’s religious renaissance and political development. He attributes the success of Fo Guang Shan to Hsing Yun’s strategy of “persuasion and flexible compromise,” as well as his adoption of an effective Taiwanese business model that focuses on identifying potential markets, training workers, and developing transnational networks (MADSEN 2007, 70–73). In his recent book, Jiang Canteng, a prolific scholar of Taiwanese Buddhism, calls Hsing Yun a “great master of management” (*jingying dashi* 經營大師). He attributes the organizational success and continuous expansion of Fo Guang Shan to the founder’s ingenious managerial knowledge and skills (JIANG 2009, 391–401).

Previous scholarship on Taiwanese Buddhism has offered valuable insights into the history and development of Fo Guang Shan, the Buddhist ideology of Hsing Yun, and the strategies adopted by the founder to make Fo Guang Shan one of the biggest and most successful international Buddhist organizations in the world. While these studies, without fail, provide a brief biography of Hsing Yun based on the hagiographic biography (FU 1995), the monk’s collected works (FO GUANG SHAN n.d.),<sup>3</sup> or their personal interviews with the monk, they do not pay particular attention to the various biographical accounts of Hsing Yun as told in the popular media produced by Fo Guang Shan’s own press, art gallery, and television station.

Sacred biography, which inspires faith and practice in various religious traditions, is a significant traditional genre of Buddhist literature. The lives of the Buddha, bodhisattvas, and eminent monks have been articulated in art, texts, and religious practices in Buddhist traditions across East, South, and Southeast Asia (see, for instance, AUGUSTINE 2004; KIESCHNICK 1997; OBEYESEKERE 2001; SCHOBBER 1997). The writing of hagiography began almost as soon as Buddhism arrived in China. John KIESCHNICK (1997) examines the three collections of Chinese Buddhist hagiography known collectively as the *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳 [Biographies of eminent monks] and notes that these writings had three crucial functions: to record history, to propagate Buddhism in general and to the court

circles in particular, and to promote ideals and models for the monastic community to follow. He argues that three monastic ideals, namely asceticism, thaumaturgy, and scholarship, are the most crucial themes in medieval Chinese Buddhist hagiography (KIESCHNICK 1997, 16–138). John Jørgensen provides a history of the formation of Huineng's (慧能, 638–713) hagiography. He demonstrates how the sacred biography of the sixth and last patriarch of Chan 禪 Buddhism was shaped by multiple factors, including relics, symbols of transmission, his deification, and the broader sociopolitical and intellectual context (JØRGENSEN 2005). By the Southern Song period, a number of Chan monks began to write their autobiographies. These Buddhist testimonies contained biographical accounts of their religious life and Buddhist teachings, and flaunted their spiritual attainments (WU 1990, 71–92). While sacred Buddhist hagiographies continue to be produced in China and Taiwan in modern times, little attention has been paid to these sacred biographies in modern media. Francesca TAROCCO (2008) notes that Buddhist clerics began to depend on popular media such as comics (*manhua* 漫畫), periodicals, and songs to promote Buddhism in the Republican period (1912–1949). Furthermore, given the recent scholarly interest in the contemporary retellings of the life of the Buddha and Islamic saints in popular media, there is a need to consider the biographies of eminent monks in contemporary popular media (see, for instance, MACWILLIAMS 2000; SOENARTO 2005).

This study examines the biographies of Hsing Yun as portrayed in Fo Guang Shan's popular media—a comic, an online photo album, a documentary, and a music video—to elucidate the uses and significance of Buddhist hagiography in contemporary Taiwan. Rather than assessing the accuracy of any particular genre, the article will reveal how and why such biographical accounts are produced by Fo Guang Shan to tell the life of its founder. I argue that unlike the Buddhist hagiographies of earlier times, in which eminent monks were often depicted as transcendental beings with superhuman powers and spiritual attainments, the informal and intimate portrayals of Hsing Yun in popular media seek to portray the monk as a worldly bodhisattva (*fanfu pusa* 凡夫菩薩) who works very hard to spread Buddhism and to build a Pure Land on earth. By worldly bodhisattva, I mean to imply that Hsing Yun is portrayed as a mortal monk with bodhisattva qualities such as compassion and wisdom in the this-worldly realm; I would not see the attempt to turn him into a celestial being with superhuman powers and magical abilities. Therefore, I consider these biographical works as a hybridized product of Mahayana and humanistic Buddhist doctrines, and the attempt to turn Hsing Yun into a new worldly bodhisattva. Furthermore, these popular works also demonstrate Fo Guang Shan's progressive effort to harness popular culture and information technology in proselytizing to the IT-savvy younger generation. By scrutinizing the biographies of Hsing Yun in popular media, this article will contribute to the literature on Chinese Buddhism, Buddhist hagiography, and religion in popular media.

The primary sources for this article are: (1) a comic book (ZHENG 2000) and its English edition (ZHENG 2003); (2) an online photobiography of Hsing Yun presented by FO GUANG YUAN ART GALLERY (2010a); (3) a documentary series pro-

duced by Beautiful Life Television (*Renjian weishi*; abbreviated as BLTV; 2009a); and (4) a music video (2009d) also by BLTV. This article will refer to these as an entity of popular media, popular genres, or popular works. What is significant is that unlike the traditional Buddhist hagiography of Chinese Buddhism that was and continues to be produced in printed book format, these contemporary works are not storytelling media in the sense of conventional Buddhist biographies. Rather, they are a product of modern popular culture and information technology.

#### “DEMOCRACY’S DHARMA” AND THE RISE OF HUMANISTIC BUDDHISM

The emergence of Hsing Yun’s biographies in popular media is best understood against the wider backdrop of democratization, religious pluralization, and the rise of humanistic Buddhism in Taiwan. During the first three decades of the Kuomintang’s (KMT, Guomindang 國民黨) rule from 1949 to the early 1970s, the KMT government legitimized itself as a secular, modernizing state with the promotion of Confucian modern virtues and the eradication of traditional “superstitions.” However, it also sought friendly relations with the West by offering special privileges to both Catholic and Protestant Christian groups. Although the KMT did not attempt to eliminate Buddhism or Daoism, it did impose strict controls on any kind of Buddhist or Daoist organization that might have the potential to mobilize the masses against state authorities (JONES 1999; MADSEN 2007). The Buddhist Association of the Republic of China (BAROC, Zhongguo fojiao hui 中國佛教會), the Buddhist national congress that accompanied the KMT in its retreat to Taiwan, “completely monopolized” the field of Buddhist organizations in the period prior to the 1970s.<sup>4</sup> The BAROC served as the official liaison between the Buddhist organizations in Taiwan and the KMT government and exerted a tremendous amount of control over the international image of Taiwanese Buddhism (JONES 1999, 182). For this reason, the other Buddhist groups in Taiwan remained small and local.

Following the lifting of martial law in 1987, the BAROC lost its monopoly status as the liaison between Buddhist organizations and the KMT. The Revised Law on the Organization of Civic Groups was passed two years later; this was originally intended to permit the establishment of opposition political parties, but also provided more leeway for the proliferation of both secular and religious organizations in Taiwan. The democratization of Taiwan, as Richard Madsen observes, has contributed to a remarkable “religious renaissance” as shown in the reform, revival, and rapid expansion of Buddhist organizations that meet the needs of the new middle class in modernizing Taiwanese society. He also highlights the causal relationship between Taiwan’s religious renaissance and the country’s political development, in which religious revival was not only fostered by the early phases of the transition to democracy, but also made political development possible (MADSEN 2007, xxiii, 11–12). The promises of religious freedom and liberal democracy saw the proliferation of many Buddhist organizations, and the emergence of several megatemples with huge memberships and strong financial backing. André Laliberté suggests that Buddhist organizations have had a proactive role in interacting with the

government authorities since 1989. Drawing on the cases of BAROC, Foguangshan, and Tzu Chi, he reveals the “multifarious involvement” of Buddhist organizations in Taiwanese politics and presents the different political behaviors these organizations adopt (LALIBERTÉ 2004).

The development of Buddhism in Taiwan occurred in tandem with the rise of popular culture industries on the island (MOSKOWITZ 2010 and 2011). Marc MOSKOWITZ observes that Taipei became a mass mediated cultural production center where “hybrid identities” were constructed as “people from across Taiwan migrate to Taipei, go abroad to work or study, or use music, movies, and fashion as overt markers of being part of cosmopolitan modernity” (2011, 5). The flourishing of popular culture industries, as MOSKOWITZ argues, has made Taiwan the “central producer of Chinese-language popular culture” in East and Southeast Asia as well as in Chinese speaking communities throughout the world (2011, 2).

The expansion of Taiwan’s Buddhist organizations and the new status quo of Taiwanese society since the 1980s have paralleled the popularization of a new vision of Chinese Buddhist teachings: humanistic Buddhism. Master Taixu (太虛, 1890–1947), a renowned Buddhist reformer in Republican China, was the first to introduce this concept, even though he usually referred to it as “Buddhism for human life” (*rensheng fojiao* 人生佛教). Taixu coined the term with the aim of deemphasizing the funerary and ritualistic aspects of “other-worldly” Buddhism. He encouraged Buddhists to devote their lives (*rensheng* 人生) to practice the Dharma both for themselves and for others in the “this-worldly” realm. Although none of Taixu’s tonsure disciples and grand disciples were able to make their master’s doctrines widely recognized, Taixu’s ideas influenced a number of prominent Sangha (monastics) in Taiwan, including renowned Buddhist scholar Yinshun (印順, 1906–2005), Hsing Yun of Fo Guang Shan, Cheng Yen (Zhengyan 證嚴, 1937–) of Tzu Chi, and Sheng Yen (Shengyan 聖嚴, 1930–2009) of Dharma Drum Mountain, and motivated them to propagate the “humanistic” form of Buddhism (PITTMAN 2001).

The this-worldly pragmatism of humanistic Buddhism led Hsing Yun to interpret and promote Chan and Pure Land teachings in an innovative way. He discourages formal Chan sitting meditation and believes that Chan must be integrated with and experienced in daily life. Hsing Yun also regards Pure Land teachings in a different way. He considers that the tranquility of mind can even transform the Sahā World into a sacred Pure Land.<sup>5</sup> As such, he calls for the establishment of a Pure Land in the human realm (*renjian jingtu* 人間淨土; CHANDLER 2004). Furthermore, Hsing Yun is quick to exploit modern innovations that can aid the spread of Buddhism. He advocates the promotion of Buddhism in modern languages, spreading the Dharma with modern technology, practicing the Dharma in modern daily life, and turning monasteries into modern institutions of learning (MANYI 2005). Moreover, Hsing Yun was among the first Buddhist monastics to use an automobile, slide projector, radio and television, as well as computers and the Internet to propagate the Dharma (CHANDLER 2004). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Hsing Yun and his disciples have enthusiastically appropriated modern popular culture and the mass media to tell his life story.

## A MODERN BUDDHIST HAGIOGRAPHY

Just like the eminent monks in medieval and late imperial China, the written hagiographic biography of Hsing Yun exists in book form. The title of Hsing Yun's biography (FU 1995) sounds uncannily similar to the quasi-historical Chan "Lamp (or flame) Records" (*denglu* 燈錄) published in the Song dynasty. The Chan lamp records, such as the *Jingde chuandenglu* 景德傳燈錄 [Record of the transmission of the lamp published in the Jingde era] produced by Buddhist monk Shi Daoyuan (釋道原), were compilations of biographies of eminent monks (WELTER 2006). However, unlike the lamp records that were published to illustrate the continuity of a Chan genealogy that could be traced back to the Buddha and Bodhidharma to legitimize the spiritual attainments of great Chan masters, Hsing Yun's biography is more modest in aim and scope.

The biography of Hsing Yun was written by Fu Zhiying (1958–), a Taiwanese journalist. In the preface, Hsing Yun endorses this biography and claims that it is "incredibly complete in its portrayal of my disposition, thinking, and spirituality" (FU 1995, i–ii). The biography is chronologically organized and divided into six sections. Part one presents the early life of Hsing Yun, his ordination at Qixia Monastery 棲霞寺, and his subsequent monastic training. Part two discusses Hsing Yun's arrival in Taiwan and his early innovative missionary activities in Ilan. Part three illustrates the founding of Fo Guang Shan and the success of the organization. Part four discusses Hsing Yun's missionary activities, leadership, and his affinity to Mainland China. Part five looks at the internationalization of Fo Guang Shan. The final section offers Hsing Yun's reflections on his religious career. This is then followed by four appendices which include a chronicle of Hsing Yun's life from 1927 to 1994, two maps showing the distribution of Fo Guang Shan's branch temples in Taiwan and around the world, a map showing the distribution of Buddha Light International Association centers, and a glossary of Buddhist terms. A decade later, FU Zhiying published a sequel (2006) which reflects on Hsing Yun's recent development of humanistic Buddhism and includes Fo Guang Shan's construction of colleges and universities, the promotion of Buddhist writing and media, as well as the improved cross-straits relations between China and Taiwan. Nevertheless, this book is very similar to the content, style, and tone of her first book.

A close reading of the two texts reveals two major differences between traditional Buddhist hagiographies and the modern hagiography of Hsing Yun. First and foremost, there is a significant difference in production and style. Buddhist hagiographies throughout Chinese history were often, if not always, compiled by Buddhist monks. They were written in literary Chinese and inclined to follow the style and structure of secular biographies (KIESCHNICK 1997). However, Fu Zhiying graduated from Taiwan's National Chengchi University (see FU 1995, front book flap), and she was commissioned by the Commonwealth Publishing Company, a popular commercial press in Taiwan, to write a biography of Hsing Yun for a series on contemporary figures. Over the next two years, she wrote the biography of Hsing Yun based on: (1) nineteen personal interviews with him, each lasting

between two and three hours; (2) interviews with thirty-eight relatives, teachers, disciples, devotees, friends, scholars—both Buddhist and non-Buddhist—and members of the media; and (3) printed sources from the collected works of Hsing Yun, as well as newspaper and periodical clippings of his activities in Taiwan (FU 1995, ix–x). As one might expect, given Fu’s background, the book turned out to be a journalistic biography with a hagiographic tone.

Second, there are differences between the themes presented in medieval Buddhist hagiographies and the contemporary biography of Hsing Yun. Traditional biographies tended to highlight the ascetic and thaumaturgic qualities of eminent monks. Therefore, strict abstention from sex, meat, wine, extravagant clothing, self-mutilation, sacrifice, and the performance of miracles were common tropes in these sacred writings (KIESCHNICK 1997). In contrast to the traditional texts that sought to elevate the monks to the status of celestial, transcendental Bodhisattvas (*shengxian pusa* 聖賢菩薩), Hsing Yun’s biography portrays the monk as a worldly bodhisattva by focusing on his compassion, generosity, and determination in the propagation of Buddhism. As Stuart CHANDLER (2004, 41) observes, the charisma of Hsing Yun derives not so much from supernatural powers but his extraordinary ability to resonate with others and create a sense of “communal energy.” Furthermore, in line with his emphasis on humanistic Buddhism, Hsing Yun makes no overt claims of possessing paranormal powers and even downplays their importance in two ways. First, the master emphasizes that life itself is miraculous, such that even the most mundane acts, such as people’s ability to walk and swim, can be regarded as “magical.” Second, he points out the ethical ambiguity and spiritual limitations of supernatural powers, in which the possession of such abilities does not equate to liberation from the wheel of rebirth (CHANDLER 2004, 38–39). For this reason, common themes and prevalent tropes in traditional Buddhist hagiographies have no place in Hsing Yun’s biography; the biographies of the master in popular media—akin to Fu’s hagiography of him—seek to present the monk as a this-worldly Bodhisattva with outstanding human qualities in an informal and intimate manner.

#### THE BIOGRAPHICAL COMIC AND PHOTOBIOGRAPHY OF HSING YUN

Throughout history, Buddhist visual images have served as important media for the dissemination of Buddhism to both the elites and common people. As mentioned in the *vinaya* text, for instance, the Buddha instructs his disciples to paint a “wheel of birth and death” underneath the room at the gate of the temple to teach people about *samsāra* (TEISER 2006). In the case of Japan, *etoki* 絵解き, a term which generally refers to printed materials such as illustrated guidebooks, instructional manuals, and maps, played a vital role in popularizing Buddhism between the tenth and nineteenth centuries. *Etoki* allowed monks to reach out to subliterate audiences and bridged the world between clerics and lay people (KAMINISHI 2006). Similarly, Feng Zikai (豐子愷, 1898–1975) collaborated with Master Hongyi (弘一, 1880–1942) to produce *hushengtu* 護生圖 [Paintings

to protect life] with the aim of promoting the Buddhist teaching of compassion and sympathy (BARMÉ 2002). The visual biographies of Hsing Yun in comic strips and an online photo album were produced to narrate the life of the master and, of course, to propagate Buddhism—particularly to the younger generations.

Since the 1970s, Japanese Buddhists have depended on manga (comic books) to tell the story of the Buddha and to propagate Buddhist teachings (MACWILLIAMS 2000). *Bukkyō komikkusu* 仏教コミックス, literally Buddhist comics, for instance, is a massive 108-volume manga series produced between the 1980s and 1990s to illustrate the life of the Buddha, explain Buddhist teachings, present the history of Buddhism in Asia, and teach readers how to practice Buddhism in their daily lives. This massive comic series also comes with a manga dictionary of Buddhist terms (*Manga bukkyō jiten* まんが仏教辞典) (SUZUKI SHUPPAN 2012).

In Taiwan, comics are very popular among the younger generation (see, for instance, CHEN 2007; LENT 1999). Therefore, it is hardly surprising that Taiwanese were quick to follow their Japanese counterparts in the production of Buddhist comics. Renowned Taiwanese cartoonist Tsai Chih-chung (Cai Zhizhong 蔡志忠, 1948–), best known for his comics on Chinese literature, history, and philosophy, has drawn numerous Buddhist comics since the late 1980s.<sup>6</sup> His comics on Buddhism include *Faju jing* 法句經 (*Dharma Sutra*), *Xinjing* 心經 (*Heart Sutra*), *Fotuo shuo* 佛陀說 (*Sayings of Buddha*), *Liuzu tanjing* 六祖壇經 (*Wisdom of the Zen Masters*), and *Chan shuo* 禪說 (*Zen Stories*).<sup>7</sup> These Buddhist comics were very well received in Taiwan and have been translated into several languages, including English, French, and Indonesian.

In recent years, Buddha's Light Publishing has produced a one-hundred-volume comic series entitled the *Gaoseng zhuan quanji* 高僧傳全集 [Anthology of eminent Buddhist monastics] to tell the lives of a hundred eminent monks belonging to various Buddhist traditions from early Indian Buddhism to contemporary times. As Hsing Yun points out, this comic series has the following features: (1) warm and touching stories of eminent monastics; (2) lively, humorous illustrations; (3) abundant and accurate information; and (4) complete and thorough structural arrangements (ZHENG 2003, ii). The first comic in the series is entitled *Star and Cloud: Venerable Master Hsing Yun*.<sup>8</sup> The blurb reads:

With courage, confidence, and resolve, the child named “Profound Benefit,”—now a gallant monk—knew the wild and overgrown bamboo grove was the perfect place to make his dream come true. Who would have guessed that over a 100 temples and a million disciples were soon to follow.

(ZHENG 2003 [book cover])

In the preface, Hsing Yun expresses his hope that such comic biographies can provide “a relaxed and easy way to learn about the Dharma” (ZHENG 2003, i). The master believes that “comic strips are an especially effective means of communication for teenagers since they are already familiar with them and enjoy them.” Therefore, he hopes that these comics can “make Buddhism available to more people” and that the “presentation of role models such as eminent monastics can

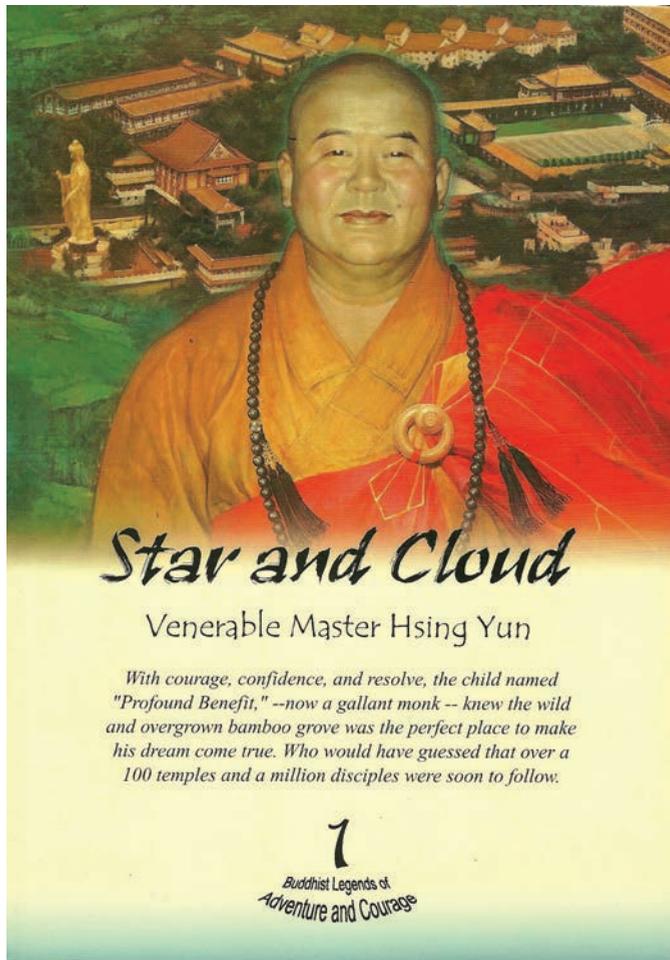


FIGURE 1. Cover of *Star and Cloud: Venerable Master Hsing Yun*.

touch the hearts of young, impressionable teenagers and allow everyone to enjoy a beautiful, wholesome life” (ZHENG 2003, iii).

Zheng Wen (鄭問, 1958–), one of the most renowned comic artists in Taiwan, was commissioned to illustrate Hsing Yun’s manga-style biography (see ZHENG 2003, front inner flap). He aims to tell the life story of Hsing Yun in a way “different from his portrayal in newspapers, magazines, and on television, [when he is] surrounded by devotees and flashing cameras.” Zheng saw the drawing of Hsing Yun’s life as a great responsibility and challenge. Therefore, he mentioned that it was the “first time in [his] illustration career where [he had] actually spent more time on digesting the material and preparing the script than on the actual drawing of the scenes” (ZHENG 2003, iv). The comic artist illustrates the life of Hsing Yun over four parts in a chronological manner, as in Fu’s biography. Part one tells the life of Hsing Yun from his childhood to his ordination and early training in the monastery; part two illustrates the master’s arrival in Taiwan, and the difficulties

he encountered; part three presents Hsing Yun's successful missionary activities in Ilan and his innovative strategies to promote Buddhism; and the final section concludes with the founding of Fo Guang Shan and lauds the achievements of the visionary founder in making Fo Guang Shan one of the largest and most remarkable Buddhist organizations in Taiwan and around the world. The appendices offer a chronology of Hsing Yun's life from 1927 to 1999, a brief introduction to humanistic Buddhism, a brief history of Fo Guang Shan, and two maps illustrating the distribution of Fo Guang Shan branch temples in Taiwan and around the world.

Zheng's comic is a "visualized narrative"—to borrow Frederick Schodt's term—of Hsing Yun's life (SCHODT 1996). It is very similar to Fu's biography of the master and in fact can be regarded as the pictorialization of the written hagiography (FU 1995). Concomitantly, *Star and Cloud* does not attempt to make Hsing Yun into a celestial being with superhuman powers; rather, it echoes many of Hsing Yun's noble human traits—compassion, diligence, generosity, and determination—as presented earlier in the hagiographic biography.

The comic shows that during his childhood, the young Hsing Yun was full of compassion. It tells the story of him rescuing a baby chick from a fire and tenderly nursing it to health. Because of his kind actions, the baby chick later grew into a "healthy and happy hen that laid several eggs a day" (see FIGURE 2) (ZHENG 2003, 14–16). Hsing Yun's compassion and generosity, for instance, are also illustrated in the scene where he was monitored by local police officers that had received anonymous reports claiming that the master was involved in pro-communist activities. Instead of expressing enmity or pleading his innocence, Hsing Yun continued his missionary activities as usual, and even, on one occasion, offered blankets to the sleeping officers. The police officers followed the master for over a year and realized that there was nothing suspicious about him. In the end, they became so impressed by both his teachings and actions that they became his devotees (see FIGURE 3) (ZHENG 2003, 65–68).

Hsing Yun is also depicted as a diligent and determined monk throughout his religious career. For instance, when he first arrived in Taiwan and resided in the Perfect Light Temple (Yuanguang si 圓光寺) in Chungli (Zhongli 中壢), he worked very hard to repay the kindness of Master Miaoguo 妙果. He was extremely diligent in performing the temple chores, including drawing six hundred pails of water for approximately eighty people residing in the monastery, pushing the temple handcart for over ten miles to bring back supplies, cleaning the bathrooms, and preparing bodies for burial (see FIGURE 4). But even with so many temple chores to perform, the master never stopped reading and writing articles on Buddhism (ZHENG 2003, 61–64).

According to Zheng, Hsing Yun's most remarkable achievement, however, was the building of Fo Guang Shan. When Hsing Yun chose Bamboo Grove of Big Tree Village in Kaohsiung as the site for its construction in the 1960s, he faced criticism from those who came with him. Zheng illustrates the words of disapproval in three speech balloons:

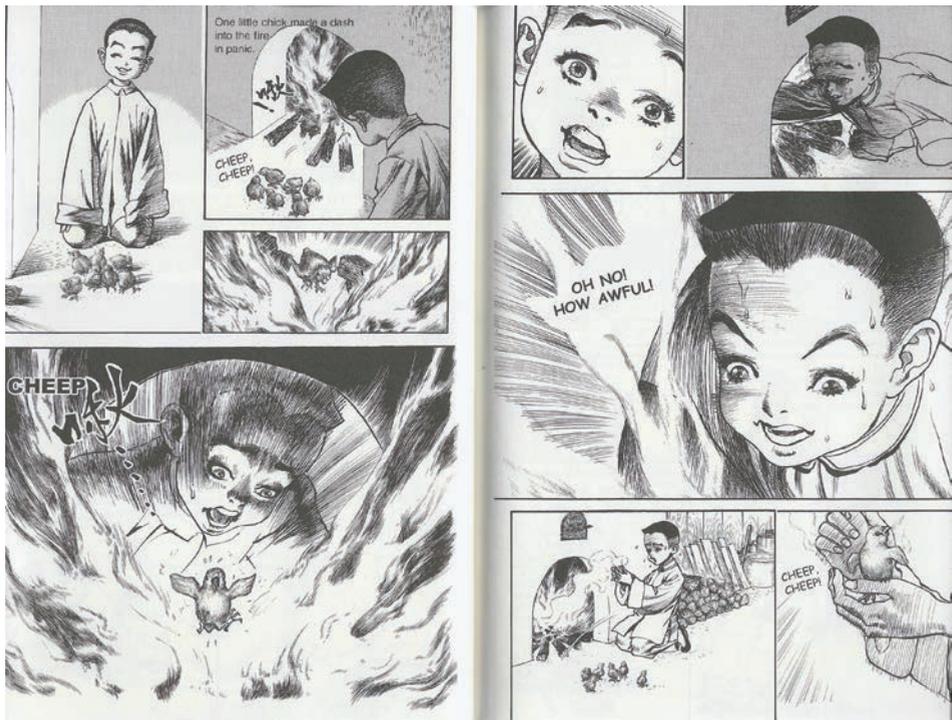


FIGURE 2. Rescuing a baby chick from a fire (ZHENG 2003, 14-15).

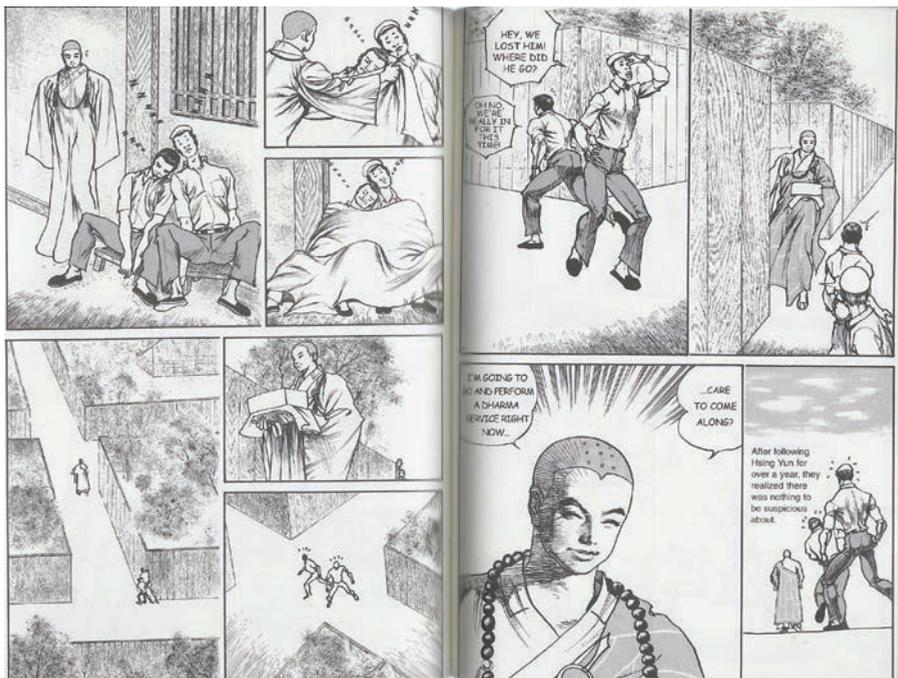


FIGURE 3. Offering blankets to the sleeping officers (ZHENG 2003, 66-67).

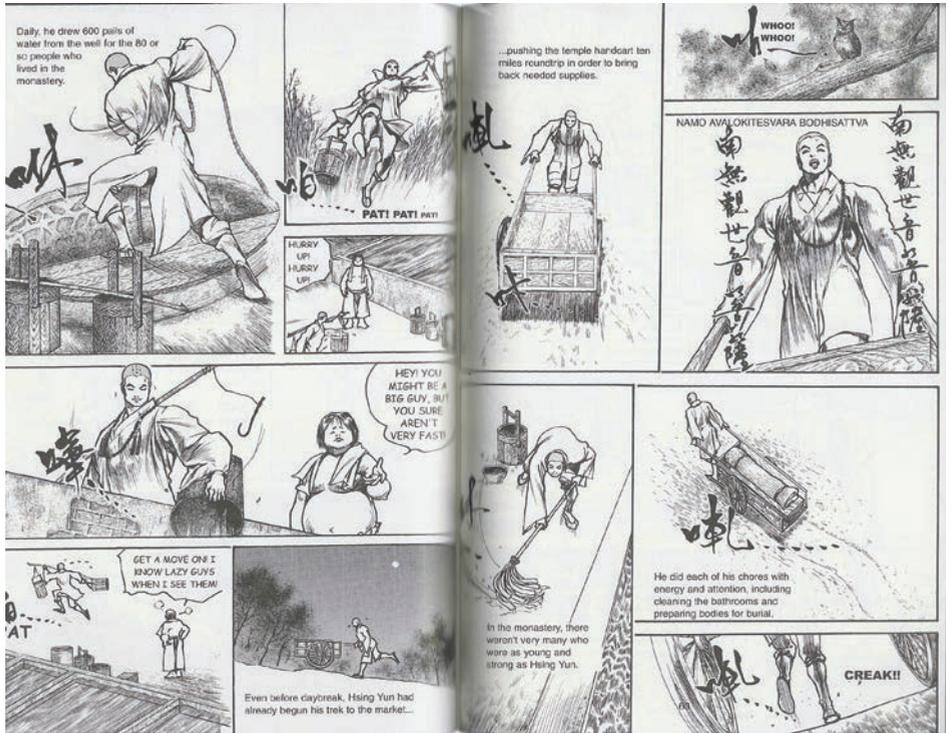


FIGURE 4. Working diligently at the Perfect Light Temple (ZHENG 2003, 62–63).

Monk A: Master, forget this place! Who would ever come here to pay their respect to the Buddha!

Monk B: You bet! Master himself will be the only one who will bother to come here!

Monk C: I agree! No one in their right mind would come here!

(ZHENG 2003, 102)

Despite the criticism and difficulties, the visionary monk refused to give up. He determinedly led his disciples to clear the dense bamboo forest and, in one instance, even formed a human chain to pass rocks and boulders, one by one, to repair the upper dam of the Compassionate Release Pond that had been damaged by a typhoon (see FIGURE 5) (ZHENG 2003, 102–105). The construction of Fo Guang Shan, as the master calls it, “[was] like an army of ants moving a great mountain” (ZHENG 2003, 106).

Eventually, the master succeeded in his ambitious temple building project and developed “Fo Guang Shan into a world famous Buddhist site” (ZHENG 2003, 110). In sum, *Star and Cloud* is in harmony with Hsing Yun’s ideas of humanistic Buddhism: no supernatural powers, no extraordinary miracles. However, the comic appears to me like the Buddhist version of a “rags to riches” story. It informs readers how human traits valued in Buddhism—compassion, generosity, diligence,

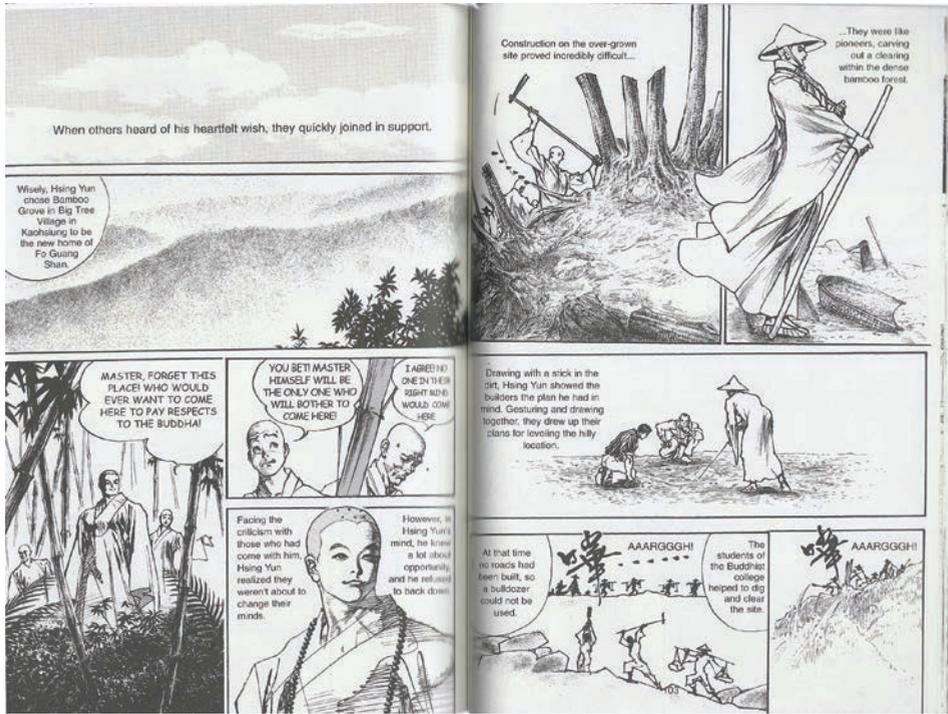


FIGURE 5. Building Fo Guang Shan (ZHENG 2003, 102–103).

and determination—enabled a poor, modest monk to emerge as a worldly bodhisattva, who is able to bring the Dharma to every part of the world.

Cartoonist and comics theorist Scott McCloud argues that unlike “real” books “with no pictures at all” (MC CLOUD 1994, 140), “a huge range of human experiences can be portrayed in comics through either words or pictures” (MC CLOUD 1994, 152). The synergy between words and pictures in comics, as McCloud points out, has “great powers to tell stories when creators fully exploit them both” (MC CLOUD 1994, 152). In this case, we see how words and pictures can be used to portray the experiences of an eminent monk.

In 2003, Fo Guang Shan launched the *Yunshui sanqian* 雲水三千 [Cloud and water] photo exhibition at the Fo Guang Yuan Art Gallery to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Hsing Yun’s Dharma propagation in Taiwan. This exhibition later culminated in an online photo album (see FIGURE 6) called “A 50-Year Anniversary Photobiography of Master Hsing Yun” (FO GUANG YUAN ART GALLERY 2010a). Photography, as scholars have pointed out, is an efficacious medium for inspiring collective memory, documenting the past, and educating about the present.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, it is likely that Hsing Yun’s photobiography aims to perform a similar function: to inspire a sense of collective memory of the master’s prolific religious career among devotees and to teach Buddhism to the IT-savvy younger generation.



FIGURE 6. A 50-Year Anniversary Photobiography of Master Hsing Yun. Source: Fo Guang Yuan Art Gallery.

This online photobiography, which is modeled after the exhibition, tells the life of Hsing Yun in a thematic fashion. The album begins with a preface by Wu Po-hsiung (Wu Boxiong 吳伯雄, 1939–), a senior Kuomintang official, who was the chairman of the Buddha’s Light International Association between 1998 and 2004. Wu recalls his intimate conversations with the master and indicates his hope that the missionary activities of Hsing Yun, as presented in the photographs, can “inspire faith among sentient beings, document the history of Buddhism, generate merit for society, and create goodness for the human realm” (FO GUANG YUAN ART GALLERY 2010a). The online album is subsequently organized into nine themes—wandering monk (*xingjiao* 行腳), awards (*dejiang* 得獎), personalities (*renwu* 人物), culture (*wenbua* 文化), education (*jiaoyu* 教育), charity (*cishan* 慈善), Dharma propagation (*hongfa* 弘法), the Buddha’s Light International Association (Fo Guang Hui 佛光會), and *bodhimandā*<sup>10</sup> (*daochang* 道場)—and is followed by a chronology of the master’s life from 1927 to 2003. The online gallery highlights the countless contributions of Hsing Yun to the spread of Buddhism, his promotion of charity and education, and even the advancement of religious harmony. In sum, he is presented as a great monk, and most importantly, a bodhisattva on earth.

C. Julia HUANG (2009), in her study of Cheng Yen and the Tzu Chi movement, points out how the image of Cheng Yen has an “innate magnetism”; both female and male disciples and devotees would often describe this as a “phenomenal beauty.”<sup>11</sup> They will often describe the charismatic nun with the Buddhist term *zhuangyan* (莊嚴), which Huang translated as “solemnly specular” (HUANG 2009, 29). In fact, her portrait can be seen “in every Tzu Chi branch, and in every piece

of Tzu Chi literature”; her followers will display it in their living rooms at home, behind the sales counters of their small shops, on the dashboard in their cars, inside their wallets, and even wear a prayer-bead bracelet with her photo inserted in one of the beads (HUANG 2009, 15–16). While devotees of Cheng Yen have elevated the status of their leader to a *shangren* (上人, a supreme person, or literally, “above human”) and even glorify her as a celestial bodhisattva (like Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of compassion), I sense less of that in the pictorial portrayal of Hsing Yun. While the comic biography and online photo gallery serve to narrate the successful religious career of Hsing Yun and present him as a worldly bodhisattva, I argue that the master’s life story, as told in the “rags to riches” model, emphasizes his journey from humble beginnings to becoming the founder of one of the world’s largest and most successful Buddhist organizations. There is no attempt to boast of his paranormal abilities or transform him into a living deity.

#### SINGING PRAISES TO THE MASTER:

##### HSING YUN IN DOCUMENTARY AND MUSIC VIDEO

Besides the comic book and online photobiography, Hsing Yun’s life story is also told on film. BLTV, Fo Guang Shan’s TV station, produced a documentary series and a music video to document the life of their founder. Documentary, as Robert ROSENSTONE (1995, 32) points out, “whether it is the film compiled of old footage and narrated by an omniscient voice (the voice of History) or a film that centers on ‘talking heads’ (survivors remembering events, experts analyzing them, or some combination of the two) ... like the dramatic feature, tends to focus on heroic individuals.” Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Fo Guang Shan made a documentary to tell the life of a heroic figure, Hsing Yun.

BLTV released a documentary series entitled *Dianran xinhuo: Fo Guang Shan de gushi* [Igniting the torch: The story of Fo Guang Shan] to present the history and story behind fifteen major architectural structures in Fo Guang Shan in fifteen episodes: *Tou shanmen* [Mountain gate], *Baozang guan* 寶藏館 [Buddhist museum], *Jingtu dongku* 淨土洞窟 [Pure Land cave], *Lingshan shengjin* 靈山勝境 [Vulture peak], *Chengfo dadao* [Way to Buddhahood], *Daxiong baodian* 大雄寶殿 [Mahāvīra Hall], *Dizang dian* 地藏殿 [Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva hall], *Dazhi dian* 大智殿 [Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva hall], *Dongshan lanqiuchang* [Eastern Mountain basketball court], *Dafo cheng* 大佛城 [Great Buddha land], *Conglin xueyuan* 叢林學院 [Fo Guang Shan Tsung Lin University], *Dabei dian* 大悲殿 [Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva hall], *Daci yuyouyuan* 大慈育幼院 [Tatzu Children’s Home], *Foguang jingshe* 佛光精舍 [Fo Guang senior citizens’ home], and *Puxian dian* 普賢殿 [Samantabhadra Bodhisattva hall] (BLTV 2009a). The narrator of the documentary is none other than Hsing Yun himself. Hsing Yun, during an interview with Stuart Chandler, advised the researcher: “To know Fo Guang Shan, you must know me.” What the master meant was that Fo Guang Shan, both as a monastery and as an institution, is so intimately tied to his life that it is impossible to speak of it in either sense without reference to his activities, values, or ideals (CHANDLER



FIGURE 7. “Igniting the Torch—The Story of Fo Guang Shan.” Source: Beautiful Life Television.

2004, 28). Therefore, it can be argued that Fo Guang Shan is the “biographical object” of Hsing Yun (see HOSKINS 1998).<sup>12</sup>

In each short episode, which lasts between four and six minutes, Hsing Yun discusses the various aspects of his life story—with touching background music, old footage, and photographs—that are tied to different architectural structures in the monastery. For instance, in the first episode on Mountain Gate, the founder candidly explains that despite the KMT government’s discrimination against Buddhism and anything associated with the word “Fo” (佛, Buddha) in the 1960s, he decided to name his monastery Fo Guang Shan when others advised against it:

Many people advised me not to do so. [I should] not put the word “Fo” in front [of my organization’s name]. But I am a monk. If I do not place the Buddha in front, then who should I put in front? There is nothing more adorable than the Buddha’s light. There is nothing that shines brighter than the Buddha’s light. I made up my mind, prepared a signboard, and named [my organization] Fo Guang Shan. (BLTV 2009c; translation mine)

In episode five, Hsing Yun tells the history of the Way to Buddhahood, the pathway in front of Mahāvīra Hall, to his disciples. The master jokingly explains that the pathway is “not very well constructed” because “I made it.” He then goes on to tell the moving story—with the aid of old photographs—behind the construction of the pathway:

Thirty years ago, in order to reduce our [construction] expenditures, we had to depend on ourselves for many of the construction projects. However, the students from the [Buddhist] college did not come to assist us. As it was about to rain that day, we had to speed up our work. I feel that it was sloppily built. We had to complete the path before it began to rain. Therefore, it was not very well constructed. (BLTV 2009b; translation mine)

In the episode on the Eastern Mountain basketball court, Hsing Yun reveals his love for sports, and basketball in particular. He insisted that a basketball court be

built in Fo Guang Shan in order to encourage sports and physical activities among the Sangha. The master then points out how playing basketball is akin to practicing the Dharma: Basketball players should feel grateful to their opponents for making the game possible; everyone is equally significant, teammate and opponent alike, and they are the result of positive karma (BLTV 2009c).

The documentary series demonstrates the ingenuity of the founder in utilizing modern media and technology to teach the Dharma through the telling of his life story. All of the episodes have been uploaded onto YouTube, and are linked to the official BLTV website. If documentary, despite its limitations, has become a popular visual medium for conveying history to the masses as ROSENSTONE (1995) suggests, it is already probable that this genre will become increasingly important as a vehicle for narrating the life of contemporary eminent monks.

Lastly, we turn our attention to the song and music video, produced by Fo Guang Shan, on the life of Hsing Yun. Since the Republican era, Buddhist reformers such as Hongyi have composed Buddhist songs including the *Sanbao ge* 三寶歌 [The song of the three jewels] and *Qingliang geji* 清涼歌集 [The collection of songs of clarity and coolness] to introduce Buddhist teachings to a new class of educated urbanites (TAROCCO 2008). CHEN (2005) notes that there are three distinct types of Buddhist music in present-day Chinese Buddhism: Buddhist chants (*fanbai* 梵唄), Buddhist devotional songs (*fojiao gequ* 佛教歌曲), and commercial Buddhist music (*shangpin fojiao yinyue* 商品佛教音樂). A proponent of humanistic Buddhism, Hsing Yun believes in using music as an effective “expedient means” to teach the Dharma and was the proud organizer of Taiwan’s first Buddhist choir in the 1950s. He also advocates the setting of Buddhist lyrics to popular tunes to attract people without interest in the significance of the words, in the hope that this will inspire them to eventually learn more about Buddhism (CHANDLER 2004).

Voice of Ganges Recording, the recording company of Fo Guang Shan, released a single in 2005 to narrate the life of their master. The song, entitled “Singing Praises to the Master,” aims to allow “more people to be aware of the compassion and great vows of the master, [and] to learn from the master’s spirit, so that [they will] strive to make contributions to Buddhism” (VOICE OF GANGES RECORDING 2005). The lyrics, which summarize the entire life of Hsing Yun into ninety-nine characters, are translated in the table below.

Subsequently, BLTV produced a short music video for this song, broadcasted it on TV, and made it available on the Internet (BLTV 2009d). The music video begins with an image of Qixia Monastery, the place where Hsing Yun was ordained, followed by a portrait of his master and his name written in the Buddhist genealogy. Next, it shows Hsing Yun’s early religious activities in Ilan and his arduous mission to establish Fo Guang Shan in Kaohsiung. Thereafter, the video shows the present-day grandeur of the monastery, with the charismatic founder symbolically marching down the Way to Buddhahood with his disciples. Hsing Yun then delivers a short sermon:

## 師父頌 Singing praises to the master (translation mine).

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菩薩行者乘願來	A practitioner of the Bodhisattva Path returned on his vow,
千金一諾入棲霞	With a solemn promise [he] entered the Qixia [Monastery].
虔禮觀音增福慧	Sincerely honors Avalokiteśvara and gains wisdom,
勤苦參學立僧格	And diligently learns the Dharma to uphold monastic conduct.
飄洋過海興佛教	[He] crossed the oceans and seas to propagate Buddhism,
弘法度眾六十載	teaching the Dharma and liberating sentient beings for sixty years.
初演妙法於宜蘭	[He] first preached the wonderful Dharma in Ilan,
為興佛教建叢林	And established a monastery to propagate Buddhism.
分秒必爭弘法利生	[He] seizes every minute and second to propagate the Dharma and liberate beings,
無怨無悔奉獻犧牲	[He] serves and makes sacrifices [for all sentient beings] without any regrets.
您是人間佛教的行者	You are the practitioner of humanistic Buddhism,
您是娑婆世界的導師	You are the teacher of the Sahā World,
您是佛光教團的光明	You are the beacon of the Fo Guang monastic order.

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If you know that you are truly happy, you will realize that there is nothing better than to be born in this world. Is there anything better than this in the present world? You must have faith and take joy in the Dharma. So what if [one possesses] the wealth of this human realm? So what if [one possesses] the familial and romantic relationships of this human realm? I take joy in the Dharma. I take joy in the Chan. [I] do not take joy in mundane happiness. I do not want the happiness of the human realm. I have joy in my own heart.

(BLTV 2009d; translation mine)

The music video thereafter continues with the founder striking a huge bell, a three-dimensional computer animation of Fo Guang Shan, and the following message: *xiangei women zuijing'ai de Xingyun dashi* 獻給我們最敬愛的星雲大師 [Dedicated to our most beloved Master Hsing Yun]; see FIGURE 8).

In a volume on music videos, Henry KEAZOR and Thorsten WÜBBENA (2010) suggest that our everyday culture, including film, art, literature, and advertisements, has become increasingly influenced by the aesthetics, technical procedures, visual worlds, and narrative strategies of music videos. Buddhist recording companies have recognized the popularity of music videos and produced several music videos of Buddhist chants and devotional songs on video CDs (TAROCCO 2008, 133–38). “Singing Praises to the Master,” however, is probably the first music video to tell the story of a monk’s life. Therefore, it reflects the fact that music videos, besides influencing everyday cul-



FIGURE 8. “Singing Praises to the Master.” Source: Beautiful Life Television.

ture, have also penetrated into the realm of religious culture. The Fo Guang Shan movement has made use of modern popular culture and technology to disseminate Buddhism, and in this case, to offer a biographical music video of its founder. If the music video is “a short, almost mute form whose purpose is to showcase the star, highlight the lyrics and underscore the music” (VERNALLISM 2004, 16), it is clear that Hsing Yun’s music video has been produced to showcase the enlightened life of a this-worldly “Buddhist star,” who is a practitioner of humanistic Buddhism, the teacher of the Sahā World, and the beacon of Fo Guang Shan.

### CONCLUSION

Sacred biography has all along been a significant literary genre across the various Buddhist traditions. Buddhist hagiography offers fascinating accounts of the ascetic, prolific, and often miraculous life of eminent monks. This article illustrates how the advent of modern popular media and technology has offered a new outlet for the telling of a Buddhist life. This allows the biography of a modern eminent monk, Hsing Yun, to be related in an accessible and fascinating manner to contemporary audiences.

Concomitantly, given the religious content of Buddhist biographies, the hagiographies of eminent monks are subject to changes in broader religious contexts. In the case of Taiwan, the biographies of Hsing Yun, as presented in the popular media, are aligned with the this-worldly pragmatism of humanistic Buddhism that is being intensively propagated by liberal Buddhist leaders in Taiwanese society. Therefore, the master's life is narrated in a "humanistic" manner that emphasizes how positive human traits, coupled with faith in the Dharma, have enabled a simple monk to emerge as a worldly bodhisattva in the this-worldly realm. His biographies in popular media have no room for superhuman powers or miraculous tales.

Finally, in exploring the narration of Hsing Yun's life story in popular media, this article has offered a case study of how a contemporary Buddhist organization has relied on popular culture and modern technology to present the biography of an eminent monk. Most importantly, it exemplifies how Buddhist popular media has integrated secular modes of storytelling into their culture in the process of drawing on the hagiographies of eminent monks for inspiration. This in turn has allowed the Buddhist past to be carefully preserved in traditional sacred biographical traditions and yet continually serve its purpose in proselytizing the faith to contemporary audiences.

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#### NOTES

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1. Hsing Yun is literally "Star and Cloud." On Hsing Yun's name, see FO GUANG YUAN ART GALLERY (2010b).

2. Currently, Fo Guang Shan has more than two hundred overseas branches on five continents.

3. The collected works of Hsing Yun have been digitized and made available online. See FO GUANG SHAN (n.d.).

4. For a history of the BAROC, see JONES (1999).

5. *Sahā* World literally means the world of endurance, and it refers to the land on earth.

6. For a selected list of comics by Tsai Chih-chung, see TENG (2004).

7. Several of Tsai Chih-chung's Buddhist comics have been made into computer animations and can be viewed on Taiwan National Central Library website. See NATIONAL CENTRAL LIBRARY (2003).

8. Madelon Wheeler-Gibb, an American Buddhist and the Executive Director of Spacious Mind Centre, is the translator for the English edition; see ZHENG (2003).

9. For research on photography, memory, and history, see LURY (1998); BRENNEN and HARDT (1999).

10. *Bodhimaṇḍa* literally refers to the place where enlightenment is achieved. In this context, it refers to the venue at which religious activities are carried out or where devotees pay obeisance to the Buddha.

11. The Tzu Chi Foundation was founded by Cheng Yen in 1966 in Hualien, Taiwan. It is a Buddhist charitable organization that provides social and community services, medical care, education, and humanitarian aid in Taiwan and around the world. At present, Tzu Chi has volunteers in 47 countries, with 372 offices worldwide; see TZU CHI (2014).

12. “Biographical objects” are objects used by narrators as the cornerstone of a story about themselves and as a vehicle to define their personal and sexual identity.

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2009c *Dongshan langqiuchang* 東山籃球場 [Eastern mountain basketball court]. <http://www.blvtv.tv/events/fire/video9.html> (accessed 17 February 2014).

2009d *Fo Guang Shan de gushi: Shifu song* 佛光山的故事—師父頌 [Singing praises to the Master]. September 8. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YdwsSYSV068> (accessed 17 February 2014).

2009e *Tou shanmen* 頭山門 [Mountain gate]. <http://www.blvtv.tv/events/fire/videoI.html> (accessed 17 February 2014)

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