Dharma Function with Sound, Dharma Propagation with Music – A Study of Buddhist Chants and Buddhist Songs of Fo Guang Shan

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Abstract

This paper introduces the historical development and current state of Buddhist chants and songs at Fo Guang Shan, an international Buddhist headquarters founded by Venerable Master Hsing Yun. This study also offers academic analysis of the musical forms from a selected set of Buddhist chants and songs with a specific focus on how particular musical forms are manifested in these as well as why they have become popular. Most of the musical scores are transcribed by the author, some of them from recordings made in the main shrine of Fo Guang Shan, and others provided by the Fo Guang Shan Institute of Humanistic Buddhism.

Keywords: ocean-tide voice, Buddhist chants, Buddhist songs, folk song, new age music

1. Foreword

It is recognized that Buddhist music can give rise to revelations during offerings, thus its prominent place in it. As said in volume twenty-nine of the Madhyama Āgama:

The Buddha remarked, “Śramaṇa, I ask you, please answer as you please. What does that mean? When you were at home, were you not good at playing the lute while singing?” The śramaṇa said, “Yes, my Lord.” The Buddha replied, “What does that mean? If you played the lute with loose strings, would the music come out harmonious and beautiful?” The śramaṇa said, “No, my Lord.” The Buddha then replied, “What does that mean? If you played the lute with strings of the right tightness, would the music come out harmonious
and beautiful?” The Śramaṇa answered, “Yes, my Lord.” The Buddha concluded, “That’s it, Śramaṇa, be most diligent, pay special attention and concentrate. Without great diligence, the mind slackens. Therefore, you should distinguish between the two, make keen observations, and never slacken.”

The lute should never be played with strings too tight or too loose, but with suitable tension. This was how the Buddha revealed to all sentient beings “the middle way.” According to volume three of Dīrgha Āgama:

The Buddha told Ānanda, “There are four kinds of beings in this world who deserve to be built with offerings of pagodas, and of flowers and music. Who are these four kinds? First, tathāgata who deserve to be built with offerings of pagodas; second, pratyekabuddha; third, śravaka; fourth, cakravartin. These four kinds deserve to be built with offerings of pagodas, and of flowers and music.”

The importance of musical offerings can be seen from the sūtras. The sūtras extensively discuss the role of music, showing its importance as a vehicle of Dharma propagation.

In December 2015, I attended the third Symposium on Humanistic Buddhism at Fo Guang Shan at the invitation of Professor Cheng Gongrang and Venerable Miao Fan. As a music scholar, I took notice of the Buddhist music in Fo Guang Shan. This paper was borne from a preliminary study of the history and current state of Buddhist chants and songs practiced at Fo Guang Shan carried out over the duration of my five-day visit, and was therefore labeled as an investigation. Even though this paper is named an investigation, it is still an academic paper which introduces the history and current state of Buddhist chants and songs of Fo Guang Shan, and contains an academic analysis of the musical forms. This may well be the first paper that contains academic research on the Buddhist chants and songs of Fo Guang Shan.

Explanations need to be made for the use of the specialized terms Buddhist chants and Buddhist songs in this paper. In regard to Buddhist chants, I referred to it in my
book *Buddhist Chants of the Jiangsu-Zhejiang-Shanghai Area* as “musical offerings” that consist of two types—singing and chanting, both of which are used in rituals and services in temples. “Buddhist songs” are used to refer to contemporary works that praise the buddhas and contain Buddhist content. The Buddhist songs within this paper refer to those composed by Fo Guang Shan in Taiwan, with lyrics penned by Venerable Master Hsing Yun.

### 2. A Review of Buddhist Chants and Buddhist Songs of Fo Guang Shan

In his book, *A Study of Master Hsing Yun’s Humanistic Buddhism Thought*, Professor Cheng Gongrang cited and analyzed the paper published by Venerable Master Hsing Yun, who used the pen name “Mo Jia,” in *Human Life Magazine* in 1954, titled “The six-year trend in the development of Buddhism in Taiwan.” In this paper, Venerable Master Hsing Yun introduced his views on music:

> It is undeniable that sincere emotions can be expressed in ancient incense praises and verses. However, the times have changed. For Dharma propagation today, the ancient praises and verses are not energetic or active enough. They are insufficient to represent the strong emotions of a great number of young people in terms of their enthusiasm, vigor, and love for the Dharma.³

I think these words of Venerable Master Hsing Yun should be interpreted in such a way. Traditional Buddhist chants are used to express the sincerity of the followers of the Buddha. It is appropriate to sing them at Dharma assemblies. However, because of their slow pace, they may not be suitable for young people full of vigor and vitality. “No fixed Dharma” or “no such thing as the Dharma” is a key concept of the Dharma. It means that everything comes into existence because of past karma or causes and conditions. Nothing is inherently fixed. It is therefore necessary to create passionate and active Buddhist songs for young people to sing or chant. This goes to show how full of prajñā wisdom the words of Venerable Master Hsing Yun are.
Fo Guang Shan continues to align with the thoughts of the Venerable Master by maintaining the traditional Buddhist chants (傳統梵唄) and also composing new Buddhist songs (佛歌) at the same time to cater to the active nature of young people. This can be seen in the illustration below.

Traditional Buddhist chants are called “ocean-tide voice” in Taiwan (“Chan tone” in Mainland China). This cultural heritage sung in Chinese Buddhist Dharma assemblies and passed down by oral teaching is still well preserved in Fo Guang Shan. Venerable Master Hsing Yun believes:

Music is very important for Buddhism. In this world, people acquire clarity and purity by hearing the Dharma sung. For example, the sūtras say “thus I have heard” rather than “thus I have seen” because, compared with seeing, hearing is more
meaningful and easier to memorize. Buddhism highly values chanting and singing.⁴

Venerable Master’s accurate understanding of the value of Buddhist chants was one of the main reasons why Fo Guang Shan Buddhist chants could be handed down and preserved intact to this day. Not only have they preserved the perfect style and melody of the ocean-tide voice, but have also been well-trained and performed the chanting very professionally. At 5:50 am, on December 5, 2015, which was the fifteenth day of the eleventh month in the Chinese calendar, I attended the morning assembly at the main shrine of Fo Guang Shan. There was a beautiful rendition of Buddhist chanting and songs. From the “Praise of the Jeweled Censer,” to circumambulating the Buddha, to “Three Refuges,” to “Praise to Skanda,” every bit of the chanting was perfect. Not only that, the karmadana sang with a solemn voice and evoked such a dignified atmosphere. It must be pointed out that Fo Guang Shan is a monastery for both genders. Therefore, the blend of male and female voices produced an effect of softness within strength. This has been specifically lacking in monasteries in Mainland China.

Apart from the traditional Buddhist chants, the Fo Guang Shan community would sing songs with lyrics written by the Venerable Master in modern musical melodies. Some of the songs were written by contemporary songwriters. The tradition of Buddhist songwriting and singing at Fo Guang Shan dates back to the 1950s. In the spring of 1949, Venerable Master Hsing Yun came to Taiwan with his monastic rescue team, and began his long and arduous journey of Dharma propagation in Taiwan. He began organizing activities to propagate the Dharma at Lei Yin Temple in Yilan. At first, people did not have a correct understanding of Buddhism. He organized chanting associations, as well as the first Buddhist singing group in Taiwan, which played an important role in Dharma propagation. Venerable Master understands the importance of hearing the Dharma, which enhances the audience’s understanding and memory, and makes the Dharma more easily acceptable. Venerable Master once said:

The bodhisattvas practice twenty-five kinds of perfect understanding, and perfect understanding through the faculty of hearing is one of the prominent practices. Hearing in
cultivation is more important than seeing. Sight cannot reach a far distance, but hearing can. Past events can be heard when retold, but the sight is no longer there. We cannot see someone speaking on the other side of a wall, but we can hear it. In fact, we should learn to hear and listen for “the sound of one hand clapping.” If you can hear the “sound of silence,” you attain wisdom through hearing.⁵

According to the sources provided on the official website of Fo Guang Shan:

In 1957, Venerable Master Hsing Yun felt that Buddhist chanting was dignified and pleasing to the ear, yet inaccessible to the public and difficult for them to learn. To make Buddhist music more easily acceptable, a group including Venerable Zhu Yun, Li Ping-nan who resides in Taichung, Professor Wu Ju-che of the National Taipei University of Technology, Professor Yang Yong-pu of the Military Communication Academy at Yilan, professors of music Li Chung-he and Hsiao Hu-yin, and Venerable Master Hsing Yun composed many modern Buddhist songs and progressively promoted Buddhist music.⁶

The lyrics of the Buddhist songs performed by the Yilan Youth Choir were primarily penned by Venerable Master Hsing Yun. In subsequent years, some Taiwanese musicians composed melodies for these lyrics, which the choir then performed. Early notable compositions by Venerable Master Hsing Yun include “Song of the Dharma Propagator,” “Prayer,” “Let’s Take Refuge in the Buddha Now,” “Song of Faith,” “The West,” “Song of the Sweet Dew,”⁷ among others, many of which are still sung today after many decades. Through the activities of the choir, some Buddhist songs with notable melodies spread rapidly, thus facilitating the learning of the Dharma among youths. These songs also became Venerable Master’s method of Dharma propagation.

The melodies of Fo Guang Shan’s Buddhist songs primarily come from two
sources. First are existing melodies (including Chinese folk songs and opera tunes) rewritten with Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s lyrics. Second are original compositions created specifically for the lyrics. Both types are very popular, especially among the students of Fo Guang Shan Tsung-Lin University and the youths of the Buddha’s Light International Association. Many Buddhist songs composed by Venerable Master Hsing Yun five decades ago are still sung today.

3. Morphological Analysis of Fo Guang Shan’s Buddhist Chanting and Songs

According to the principles of musical analysis, the quality of a piece of music must be determined using a specific morphological study. The reasons for the success of a piece of music can only be ascertained by an analysis of the musical form and structure.

(1) Traditional Buddhist Chanting

Venerable Master Hsing Yun is very particular about the tradition of Buddhist chanting. In his earlier years when he was ordained at Qixia Temple in Nanjing, he was in the vicinity of Gaomin Temple in Yangzhou, Jinshan Temple in Zhenjiang, Longchang Temple on Baohua Mountain, and Tianning Temple in Changzhou, all outstanding in their Buddhist chanting. Therefore, Venerable Master is extremely familiar with this subject. He once said, “I have no talent for music and do not know how to sing, but I am always keen to propagate the Dharma using Buddhist chanting and music, because Buddhism is not only for me, but for the needs of all beings.”8,9 As Venerable Master himself values Buddhist chanting, its tradition is well preserved at Fo Guang Shan, and it is on these foundations it has developed further.

Figure 1.0 is the musical score I recreated from my recording of the “Three Refuges” on the December 5, 2015 morning chanting at Fo Guang Shan. (For ease of research, I have omitted the second and third parts of the lyrics.) After analysis, we find that its basic melodical framework is common to that chanted at other Chinese Buddhist monasteries, but Fo Guang Shan emphasizes the use of musical instruments in their chanting, as I have shown in the boxes drawn in this case study’s music score.
While the basic melodic framework is almost the same as used in other monasteries, due to the addition of musical instruments by Fo Guang Shan monastics, the melody is replete with richness. At the same time, the addition of instruments makes chanting more difficult, and is especially true when many are chanting in unison.
Han Chinese Buddhist chanting exhibits the phenomenon of multiple versions of lyrics sharing the same melody. An example is the common melody applied to all six-line eulogies, or another one shared by all eight-line eulogies. This is very similar to the characteristics exhibited in opera and traditional singing. The “Dedication of Merit”\textsuperscript{10} chanted at Fo Guang Shan Dharma services also shares this feature. To help the understanding of its meaning, the lyrics were rewritten by Venerable Master Hsing Yun, and thus formed a new version of the “Dedication of Merit.”

Figure 2.0

Figure 2.0 is a segment of the “Dedication of Merit” chanted at a Fo Guang Shan Dharma services. Every line of this verse is composed of seven characters, thus it is known as a seven-character verse. The melody used to chant this verse is commonly used to chant the “Verse Praising the Merits of the Buddha” which reads:

Amitabha Buddha’s body is golden in color, with forms excellent and bright light without equal. His urna can wind around Sumeru five times, His dark blue eyes are as clear [and wide] as the four great oceans.
From within his light manifests innumerable hundreds of millions of buddhas,
Manifesting bodhisattva assemblies that are also boundless.
With forty-eight vows to deliver sentient beings,
And nine grades of lotus, all enabling ascent on the other shore [of Pure Land and eventual buddhahood].\textsuperscript{11,12}

In Figure 2.0, Venerable Master Hsing Yun followed the form of the seven-character verse and wrote the lyrics:

\begin{quote}
May kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity pervade all worlds;
May we cherish and build affinities to benefit all beings;
May Chan, Pure Land, and precepts inspire equality and patience;
May our humility and gratitude give rise to great vows.\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

This verse is very melodious when chanted using the melody of the seven-character verse, and its lyrics are popular and easily understood. Applying modern lyrics to traditional melodies is also one of Fo Guang Shan’s innovations in terms of Buddhist chanting.

As my field study at Fo Guang Shan was relatively short, I could only rely on the audio recordings I obtained during that brief time. I then transcribed them into musical scores, which I then analyzed. For this reason, I can only offer two actual cases of Buddhist chanting in this paper. As stated by Venerable Hui Jiao, an eminent monk of the Liang dynasty, in his work \textit{Biographies of Eminent Monks}:

And thus there was Cao Zhi, Prince Si of Chen of the Wei dynasty, who deeply loved music and set his heart on sūtra music. He was moved by the musical saint Bansu Yuxun’s praises of the Buddha played on his zither, and also the heavenly music of the Yu Mountain. He also edited the \textit{Ruiying Benqi},\textsuperscript{14} which was transmitted later by scholars. Of
the more than 3,000 that were passed down, 42 now remain on the record.\textsuperscript{15,16}

According to this record, Han Chinese Buddhist chanting has a history of nearly two millennia. It has become an integral part of Chinese Buddhist culture, as well as Chinese music in general, the loss of which would render Chinese Buddhist culture incomplete. Fo Guang Shan sees the preservation of Buddhist chanting as highly important, and under the guidance of Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s philosophy of Humanistic Buddhism, Fo Guang Shan monastics are also very concerned about the preservation of music. Buddhist chanting is an invaluable legacy of our predecessors. Venerable Master Hsing Yun once said, “When it comes to Dharma propagation, I, a humble monk, am not concerned with empty words, but with what is more important, learning from the spirit of earlier eminent monastics in their devotion to Buddhist arts and culture.”\textsuperscript{17,18} This remark is evidence of the motivation behind the outstanding efforts made by Fo Guang Shan to preserve traditional culture.

(2) Original Compositions

A wealth of original Buddhist compositions are sung at Fo Guang Shan, most with lyrics written by Venerable Master Hsing Yun. From the time the Venerable Master started propagating the Dharma in Taiwan, he never stopped composing original Buddhist songs. In particular, during his stay in Yilan, he used the composition and singing of Buddhist songs as a major pathway of Dharma propagation. It is recorded in the book \textit{Sound of the Human World} that:

In the 1950s, Venerable Master Hsing Yun arrived in Yilan to propagate the Dharma. In what was then a conservative and traditional society. He established the Buddhist Youth Choir, using Buddhist songs as a bridge to guide the youth towards Buddhism. Due to the passion of the members of the choir towards Buddhism, they set a precedent for propagating the Dharma via radio broadcasting, as well as recording the first Buddhist music album in Taiwan in 1957 under the leadership of Venerable Master Hsing Yun. Such
unconventional methods of Dharma propagation were met with a resoundingly popular reception. Since then, Buddhist songs have been an integral part of the various activities of Fo Guang Shan, so that devotees can understand the true meaning of a Buddhist life through music.\textsuperscript{19,20}

Therefore, it can be seen that Venerable Master Hsing Yun is a pioneer and promoter of Buddhist songs. The original Buddhist songs of Fo Guang Shan fall under two categories—lyrics penned by Venerable Master Hsing Yun that are sung to existing melodies, and also original compositions both in terms of lyrics and melody. The next section expands upon the differences between the two categories.

(1) Buddhist Songs Written to Existing Melodies

A part of Fo Guang Shan’s original Buddhist songs are those in which Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s lyrics are sung to existing tunes. As the songs are already very popular, people do not need to learn the melodies anew after being given new lyrics, and can be sung immediately. This is a skillful means for teaching the Dharma. Such
melodies include traditional Chinese folk songs and operas, as well as Western and popular songs. However, the selected melodies have to be consistent with the new lyrics in terms of content, musical mood, and ideas.

Figure 3.0 is part of the “Farewell Song,” a Buddhist song very popular in Fo Guang Shan with lyrics by Venerable Master Hsing Yun. It is also the graduation song for the students of Fo Guang Shan Tsung-Lin University. The full lyrics are:

We say goodbye today, going separate ways.
When can we meet again?
We studied under the same roof.
There is no limit in our way.
I hope we stay in touch.
Strive hard, cultivate virtue and gather merits, and cherish your own future.
Revive the teaching in various undertakings, be faithful to it from beginning to end, and enjoy having the same goal and ideas.
Seek glory for the religion, and honor for self—we have to ensure the Dharma prospers.
Propagate the Dharma and benefit all beings, and the focus of Fo Guang Shan.
Until we meet again.21

Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s lyrics are full of prajñā wisdom, revealing the truth of “things gather and exist because of the maturation of causes and conditions, while they separate and disappear because the causes and conditions cease.”22 However, the message within is not negative, but positive and empowering, one of: “Propagate the Dharma and benefit all beings, and the focus of Fo Guang Shan. Until we meet again.”

The melody of “Farewell Song” is that of the Scottish folk song “Auld Lang Syne,” which is very popular and well-known. Its lyrics were written by the famous Scottish poet Robert Burns in the 18th century, and later set to a traditional Scottish folk melody.
It was widely sung thereafter. The sense of separation is found in its opening lyrics of: “Should all acquaintance be forgot and never brought to mind? Should all acquaintance be forgot, and auld lang syne?” In the American film, *Waterloo Bridge*, when the male lead British Colonel Roy Cronin and the female lead ballerina Myra Lester were about to part, they were dancing in the ballroom. The film composer modified the tune of “Auld Lang Syne” and rewrote it in triple meter to suit its use in this scene. This heightened the sense of parting. Some even renamed this song “Bon Voyage.” It can therefore be seen that Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s writing of the lyrics of the “Farewell Song” to the melody of “Auld Lang Syne” is a perfect match in terms of both the meaning of the lyrics and the mood of the music.

![MIDI Notation](image)

Figure 4.0

Figure 4.0 is an excerpt from the Buddhist song “Bodhi Tree,” with lyrics written by Venerable Master Hsing Yun sung to the melody of “Der Lindenbaum” by Franz Schubert. Originally, Schubert wrote this melody as the fifth piece of “Die Winterreise,” and it gained popularity due to its moving rhythm and finesse. This case study features the song’s first section, the structure of which is entirely replicated in the second section, making it easy to remember and sing.

The lyrics for Schubert’s “Der Lindenbaum” were completed by the poet Wilhelm Müller, and describe a wandering vagrant who, on a snowy winter day, chances upon a linden tree, which brought back the sweet memories of his childhood, playing under
a similar tree. Although the tree described by Müller is not situated in the same setting as that described by Venerable Master Hsing Yun, it reflects his mature thinking in repurposing this moving melody with a similar title to propagate the Dharma and praise the Buddha. It is melodious and emotionally profound, the melody matching the mood of Venerable Master’s lyrics. Moreover, the repetition in the melody makes it easy to learn and sing. Some may question the use of western melodies in Eastern Buddhism. However, one who truly grasps the essence of Humanistic Buddhism would understand. Applying a melody already familiar to the devotees into a Buddhist song makes it easier to accept and sing. This can be said to be a skillful means to propagate the Dharma. Venerable Master Hsing Yun said, “All living things embrace one another, so why is it that we cannot mutually embrace those of different ethnicity, citizenship, religions, and identities?”

People can embrace one another across ethnic and cultural divides because there is fundamentally no division between them. Neither is music divided by national boundaries, there are simply different styles.

Aside from singing the Venerable Master’s lyrics to the melodies of famous pieces, Fo Guang Shan devotees also sing other melodies from Chinese folk songs and opera tunes. These familiar melodies also prove to be very popular among devotees, and have become a unique feature of Fo Guang Shan Buddhist songs.

Figure 5.0
Figure 5.0 features a song very popular in Fo Guang Shan, the “Song of the Ten Practices and Cultivations,” written by Venerable Master in seven-character verse with twelve lines. The lyrics are:

Practice 1: Don’t be calculative.
Practice 2: Don’t compare.
Practice 3: Be polite.
Practice 4: Always smile.
Practice 5: Don’t worry about being disadvantaged.
Practice 6: Be honest and kind.
Practice 7: Be carefree.
Practice 8: Speak good words.
Practice 9: Befriend honorable people.
Practice 10: Everyone, be the Buddha.

If everyone tries these ten practices,
We shall live in Buddha’s Pure Land of joy and carefree.26

This verse can be sung to many melodies, and this case study features only one—the Huangmei tune being the melody here. It originated from the duet “Returning Home” in the Huangmei Opera, *Marriage of the Fairy Princess.*27 The melody only has two phrases: the first phrase spans from the first to fourth bar, the second phrase builds and extends upon it from the fifth to the eighth bar. As the second is an extension of the first, the two phrases can be repeated and sung without creating a sense of aural fatigue. Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s composition consists of twelve lines, which are easy to remember and to learn to sing.

Figure 6.0 is another rendition of the “Song of the Ten Practices and Cultivations” sung to the “Spring Tune” from Jiangnan folk music, otherwise known as the “Tune of Meng Jiangnü.”28 It originated from the melody of Chinese New Year tunes sung by performers for Jiangnan villagers. During spring festivals, these performers would visit every family to sing these melodies usually written with lyrics of auspicious greetings, and the performers would not stop singing until they were rewarded with money, and then they would go on to another household. Later on, as the melody was sung to lyrics
about the story of Meng Jiangnü, who cried at the Great Wall, it came to be known as the “Meng Jiang Nu’s Tune.” It is precisely because it was a well-known folk melody that the Venerable Master’s seven-character verse has widespread popularity.

Singing new lyrics to existing melodies has a long history in Chinese music. From as early as the Qing dynasty, the literati of New Style Schools in Chinese cities had been writing Chinese lyrics to existing European, American, and Japanese melodies, which came to be known as “School Music Songs.”29 Li Shutong (Venerable Hongyi) was one of the pioneers of these songs. His creations such as “Spring Visits,” “Farewell,” and “Evening Bell” were lyrics sung to existing melodies, and were very popular at that time.

I have found that Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s choice of melodies, whether solemn or light, naturally give rise to a settled and purified mind when sung. It is also evident that the devotees develop an enthusiasm for Buddhism and a religious passion during a rendition. This exhibits the transcendent characteristic of Humanistic Buddhism, which closely accompanies its engagement with the world, and through it, the songs help achieve spiritual upliftment and liberation from afflictions. I believe this is a core component of Humanistic Buddhism’s Dharma propagation through music.
(2) Original Buddhist Songs

The history of Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s original Buddhist songs can be traced to when he first came to Taiwan to propagate the Dharma. As Buddhist chanting is elegant and solemn, yet not easily appreciated by the public at that time, he created Buddhist songs to help more people come in contact with the Dharma. From then onwards, writing Buddhist songs became one of the primary tasks in his Dharma propagation. He would write the lyrics and invite composers to write the melodies, before promoting and publicizing the songs. It can be said that nearly all of the songs that are popular in Fo Guang Shan have influenced many people beyond the organization, and are even sung in both Taiwan and Mainland China, so much so that Fo Guang Shan has become an integral part of Chinese Han Buddhist culture.

Figure 7.0 is one of the most popular Buddhist songs at Fo Guang Shan, known as “Ode to the Triple Gem”—its lyrics written by Venerable Master Hsing Yun and its melody composed by Wu Ju-che. Everyone in Fo Guang Shan, whether monastic or lay followers, can sing it. Its lyrics are well-written and its meaning easy to understand. It goes:

Namo Buddhaya, Namo Dharmaya, Namo Saṅghaya, Namo Triple Gem.
You are our savior, you are our truth, you are our teacher, you are our light.
Homage to you, I believe in you, I respect you.
Namo Buddhaya, Namo Dharmaya, Namo Saṅghaya.\textsuperscript{31,32}

At the beginning, its lyrics express a Buddhist practitioner’s devout wish to take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Saṅgha. However, compared to the “Three Refuges” in traditional Buddhist chanting, “Ode to the Triple Gem” is easier to understand,—every line is closely tied to the essence and significance of the Triple Gem.
There is little material on Mr. Wu Ju-che, the composer of the melody, and I have only preliminary understanding based on information available online:
Wu Ju-che (1924—2005) is from Taipei, Taiwan. He is also known as Xianfeng, and graduated from the Tokyo Music School. For over four decades, he was a professor at the Taipei Vocational High School. In 1945, when the Japanese surrendered, he first taught the national song in front of Lungshan Temple in the Wanhua area. In 1964, at the invitation of Venerable Master Hsing Yun of the Buddhist Cultural Center, he oversaw the first Buddhist album recording. He has composed over thirty Buddhist songs, including “Inspiration from Avalokitesvara.”

Based on this information, we can conclude that Mr. Wu Ju-che had experience studying abroad, taught music at university, began writing Buddhist songs in the early 1950s, and had a close relationship with Venerable Master Hsing Yun and Fo Guang Shan.

Advanced skill was demonstrated in composing the melody of “Ode to the Triple Gem,” and it is of high artistic quality, and is therefore popular among practitioners. The song’s structure is ternary, as the recapitulated first bar features a slight change in melody, and the structure can be represented as A → B → A1. Section A of “Ode to the Triple Gem” comprises of 8 bars (1st to 8th), which is a phrase comprised of two periods symmetrically aligned. The A section of “Ode to the Triple Gem” consists of 8 bars (1st to 8th bars), which is in a symmetrical form of the upper and lower phrases. We should note that the second phrase is in the retrograde repetition of the first phrase—they share a very close relationship. Section B also comprises of 8 bars (9th to 16th bars), and the recapitulated A1 basically shared the same melody and length with A. It can be seen from the structural analysis of “Ode to the Triple Gem” that A1 is essentially A repeated, and as they are separated by B, the audience remembers the melody as repetitive while varied. One of the characteristics of music is “temporality.” It takes a certain measure of time to both display and appreciate music, thus music is also known as the “art of time.” Due to this characteristic, in order to captivate the audience and performers during a rendition, and not bore them, it must be an orchestrated mix of repeating and contrasting elements. The melody of “Ode to the Triple Gem” follows a pentatonic scale, and is totally devoid of notes in B and F. As such, it is elegant and grounded in the Chinese style, but yet grand and easy to sing.
From the above analysis, we can understand the reasons for the popularity of “Ode to the Triple Gem.” It is musically fluent and elegant, with meaningful lyrics, and replete with a high level of compositional craft. It is the assemblage of this series of factors that culminates in its wide popularity.

In 2004, Fo Guang Shan sought melodies for Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s lyrics from all over the world. To this end, the Fo Guang Shan’s Board of Directors published *Lyrics for Sounds of the Human World: Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s Buddhist Songs Competition*, featuring 200 pieces of lyrical compositions by the Venerable Master. It includes popular tunes such as “Song of the Dharma Propagator,” “Let’s Take Refuge in the Buddha Now,” “Song of Fo Guang Shan,” and “Song of the Ten Practices.” Its contents are broad and span the length of Venerable Master’s songwriting career. Some were tunes he wrote during his time in Yilan. This call for melodies resulted in recording twenty-five songs produced as two CDs, and contained songs of various languages and dialects such as Minnan, Mandarin, English, Portuguese, Thai, French, and Japanese. The compositional diversity is a unique characteristic of this album. Thanks to Venerable Tzu Hui, I received a gift of these CDs, which I listened to intently. These tunes were composed in different styles. These styles included pop music, ballads, Iberian folk songs, American country music, and ethnic music styles from countries such as Japan and Thailand. This diverse selection of musical styles is sung and performed across the world in Fo Guang Shan temples, and serve the important function of propagating the Dharma.

Regarding the exact circumstances of this call for melodies, Venerable Tzu Hui spoke extensively about this subject in *2014 Symposium on Humanistic Buddhism: Openness*. I am of the opinion that Venerable Tzu Hui’s exposition fully explains the aims of this call while introducing many musical styles of the compositions, and therefore would like to cite her:

I once organized an event called “Sounds of the Human World” at Fo Guang Shan. [What I did was to] turn Venerable Master’s poetry and verses into lyrics. I collected a total of about two or three hundred lyrics and sought melodies before turning them into Buddhist songs. We even awarded prizes for the best songs. At that time, I asked experts in music to
help and informed them: “I hope these melodies are in the style of pop music.” The experts responded with irritation to this request, and replied, “How could a well-known religious organization like Fo Guang Shan meddle in pop music? You should be making Buddhist music as an art form!” In turn I told them, “I acknowledge that there is value in Buddhist music as an art form, but our devotees do not understand it!”

The words of the Venerable Tzu Hui reflect the Humanistic Buddhist philosophy that there is no distinction between good and bad in music, so long as it brings joy and can be sung by devotees. Through her explanation, we have a very lucid understanding of the call in 2004 for melodies with compositional and stylistic requirements.

Figure 8.0 is a segment of a melody selected from “Song of Reciting the Buddha’s Name.” This music was composed by Chen Shuang-hsiung, written mainly in the F-Major, and primarily drawing from Taiwanese Hakka folk music, making it very rich in ethnic flavor. Its musical mood is joyful, accurately reflecting the lyrical content as written by Venerable Master Hsing Yun:

Oh, the call of the wooden fish resonates;  
Oh, male and female, young and old, all reciting the name of Amitabha Buddha;  
Oh, in recitation stray thoughts and delusions abate;  
Oh, unwaveringly heading to the West;  
We chant and we chant and we chant;  
Oh, we chant till our karmic obstacles disperse;  
We chant till we transcend samsāra for good;  
Without worry for food or raiment;  
With the wholehearted wish to be reborn in the pure land of stability and happiness;  
Oh, sincerely reciting the name of Amitabha.
In these lyrics, Venerable Master Hsing Yun wishes to convey the joy of the Dharma that fills monastics and lay people after chanting the name of the Buddha. As such, the composer accurately captures this musical mood and expresses it through the joyful style of a ballad.
This piece is split in two vocal parts. The chorus uses the techniques of timbre variance and combination, i.e., men and women each sing a part. The two vocal parts are sung in heterophony, with one part singing a long note while the other sings an extended or prolonged melody. The male vocal part commences with a long note that ends the phrase sung by the female part, and then the men repeat these lyrics. As with the vocal accompaniment in Chinese Opera, the interweaving and amalgamation of male and female vocals creates an environment that echoes with the chanting of the Buddha’s name.
Figure 9.0 is the initial section of the second part of the “Song of Reciting the Buddha’s Name.” The F note (circled in the case study) appears in the 6th bar, replacing the E note in the scale and changing the tonality of the song from the 6th to 8th bar to a B flat major, thus also modulating the musical style. In pentatonic folk music, there is such a method of replacing a scale’s major key with a minor one, a method of modulation called jiezi (lit. borrowing words). This method is commonly applied by changing the E note with an F note, so that the scale is moved up by four notes or down by five notes, which is known as danjie (lit. single borrow). The method of replacing the major scale to a minor scale, so that the scale moves up a 4th or move down a 5th is called yashang (lit. pushing upwards). In the case of the “Song of Reciting the Buddha’s Name,” the danjie method is used.

Figure 10.0 is a segment of the melody called “Light a Lamp” composed by Hsu Huei-wen. Its style is completely different from that of case study eight. It uses the style of minyao (or Taiwanese ballad). This style originated in Taiwan during the mid nineteen seventies, when university undergraduates all over the island were caught in a wave of composing modern-day Taiwanese ballads. A great number of ethnically-styled songs with a lively musical mood swept through the universities. The composers were largely music enthusiasts among the student population, and these compositions foreshadowed later school songs. Representative pieces of this later movement such as “Orchid,” “Grandmother’s Penghuwan,” “Village Road,” “Descendents of the Dragon,” “Wind of My Hometown,” and “Olive Tree” gained an audience in Mainland China and became the vanguard of pop music creation and consumption there. Written in the modern minyao style, “Light a Lamp” features music which is bright, smooth, and its melody reveals a wisp of ethnic character. This case study features the first period, which is composed of two parallel phrases symmetrically aligned, and is very easy to commit to memory. This style of music suits young singers. Such a selection of music shows Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s aspirations for creating Buddhist songs that have a youthful and energetic nature.
“Ode to the Triple Gem,” with lyrics composed by Venerable Master Hsing Yun and melody by Professor Wu Ju-che, became the most widely sung tune at Fo Guang Shan. In addition, the same lyrics in French were written to a different melody by Du Chang, as seen in Figure 11.0. The French piece has a slow tempo, an elegant musical mood, and clarity that transpires in its quietude. Its style belongs to new age music, which is neither pop nor classical, but spans between them, as represented by Irish singer Enya, whose songs won popular acclaim in the late 1980s to early 1990s. The melody of the “Ode to the Triple Gem” has a style very similar to Enya’s music, and the case study features the first period, made of two parts. The first is composed of two musical motifs, whereby
the latter is a transformed repetition of the former. As the second part is an extension of the first, the melody is both repetitive and varied. The subdued mood and slow rhythm reflect and are suggestive of a practitioner’s immovable, pure, and peaceful mental state.

![Musical notation](image)

Figure 11.0

To date, Fo Guang Shan’s Buddhist songs have a history of over fifty years. Over that period, it has amassed a wealth of Buddhist music. From the early composers of Buddhist songs such as Wu Ju-che, Yang Yong-pu, Li Yong-he and Hsiao Hu-yin, to the growing group of composers of today, the 2004 call for melodies and tunes for the lyrics written by Venerable Master Hsing Yun demonstrates that people of all ages and occupations have the ability to compose Buddhist music. This is the reason Buddhist songs come in a rich variety of styles.
4. Conclusion

I spent only four days at Fo Guang Shan, from my arrival in the afternoon of the December 24, 2015 to my departure on the morning of the 29th. Therefore, I understand very little about its Buddhist music.

Fo Guang Shan is a sacred Buddhist site, filled with Dharma joy. In those few days, I was touched by the Dharma services in the main shrine, the BLIA General Conference, the chanting performed by the monastics, and the Buddhist songs sung by the students of Tsung-Lin University. It is only now that I fully realize that I must study the Buddhist music of Fo Guang Shan. I also realize that one cannot truly understand Humanistic Buddhism without having been to Fo Guang Shan.

As my time at Fo Guang Shan was too short, I only gained a preliminary understanding of the historical details on how Venerable Master Hsing Yun started propagating the Dharma at Yilan, wrote songs, organized the choir, and the volume of songs composed. It is a pity that time was insufficient for an in-depth study, which I can only hope to continue in the future.

I was very honored to have met Venerable Master Hsing Yun in person during my short visit, when he shared with me his views on Buddhist chanting and its value. Venerable Master believes that Buddhist chanting differs fundamentally from other types of music in that it can calm people’s minds. He also spoke about the significance of writing Buddhist songs. Regrettably, for fear that I might take too much of the Venerable Master’s valuable time, I did not initiate an in-depth conversation on the contents of his songs. Venerable Tzu Hui is well versed in Buddhist chanting and also highly values the role of Buddhist music in spreading the Dharma. I am grateful that she gifted me with valuable musical materials. After returning to Shanghai, I wrote this academic paper based on the information I brought back. Unfortunately, the limitation of sources constrains the breadth and depth of this paper.

Fo Guang Shan’s conservation of traditional Buddhist chanting is excellent. This is reflected mainly by the use of traditional ocean-tide voice chanting during Dharma
services. The monastics meet relatively high standards regarding their chanting. As I have participated in the Dharma services and was present during the monastics’ chanting, I can conclude that the main features of this chanting are excellent intonation, proper enunciation, and attention to the intricate musical instruments within the melody. Fo Guang Shan has further developed traditional Buddhist chanting through singing Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s lyrics paired with traditional Buddhist chanting. This adds profound meaning to the original, makes it easier to understand, and therefore more readily accepted by practitioners—all without losing the nuance of tradition.

Venerable Master Hsing Yun deeply understands the function music plays in Buddhism. On more than one occasion, he has emphasized the role songs play in helping memory. From the time since the Venerable Master propagated the Dharma in Yilan, the writing and promotion of Buddhist songs have always been an important part of his work. Precisely because of this, the creation and singing of Buddhist songs at Fo Guang Shan have always been carried out with enthusiasm. Fo Guang Shan compositions primarily comprise of two categories. One is writing new lyrics for existing tunes, which could be famed Western melodies or lesser-known Chinese folk melodies. Analyses of these existing tunes reveal that they are mostly easy to sing and are consistent with the contents of the lyrics.

An example would be Schubert’s melodic “Der Lindenbaum” rewritten with the lyrics of Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s “Bodhi Tree.” Another example is “Farewell Song” written to the sentimental parting melody of “Auld Lang Syne,” which is a great fit in terms of musical mood and sentiment. Some other Fo Guang Shan Buddhist songs are sung to opera or folk song melodies, and the music chosen are all basically well-known. In the example of the “Song of the Ten Practices and Cultivations,” there are many melodic compositions available for it. For instance, one example is to sing it to the “Huangmei Tune” but it can also be sung to the “Spring Tune.” What should be pointed out is that these lyrics are basically creations of Venerable Master Hsing Yun, some of which are his aphorisms, while others are his poems. They embody deep truths and yet are easy to understand, and serve the purpose of propagating the Dharma.
Through the introduction and analysis of Fo Guang Shan’s Buddhist chanting and songs, we find that they are a small part of Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s practice of Humanistic Buddhism. He explained the practice as: “that which was taught by the Buddha himself, that which is needed by human beings, that which is pure, and that which is virtuous and beautiful. That is Humanistic Buddhism.”\textsuperscript{54,55} Under his leadership, the history and current status of Fo Guang Shan’s Buddhist chanting and songs fully reflect the essence of Humanistic Buddhism. In Chinese Buddhist history, the development of Buddhist chanting necessarily reflects the theme of “humanism,” just as written by the Song dynasty monk Venerable Zan Ning, found in the 25\textsuperscript{th} fascicle of the \textit{Song Biographies of Eminent Monks:}\textsuperscript{56}

It is said that the poetic praises spoken by Kang were sung using adaptations of the “Sounds of Zheng-Wei.” It is neither sad, happy, sorrowful, nor angry, and has the flavor of the middle way. It is just like a skillful doctor who entices an infant to take unpalatable medicine by smearing it with honey. If not for such skillful means, how can one ferry those here to the end of suffering? When singing about the Buddha we gradually become the Buddha. Skillfully guiding others is also a Buddhist undertaking, and as such it is not a small matter!\textsuperscript{57,58}

The “Kang” that is mentioned by Venerable Zan Ning refers to the 5\textsuperscript{th} Patriarch of the Chinese Pure Land School, Venerable Shaokang. The reference to the “sounds of Zheng-Wei” refers to the folk music of the ancient states of Zheng and Wei (contemporary Henan). As the popular music of the region did not fit the style of formal ceremonial music used in the royal courts, it was disparaged by Confucianists as “sounds of Zheng-Wei.” However, we can see from Venerable Zan Ning’s mention in the \textit{Song Biographies of Eminent Monks}\textsuperscript{59} that Venerable Shaokang drew elements of the folk music from the states of Zheng and Wei into Buddhist chanting, which made the latter pleasing to the ear and easy to sing. Therefore, it is evident from the developmental history of Buddhist chanting that distinguished monastics in history constantly composed and propagated the Dharma in response to human needs.
In the “Overview” of *Humanistic Buddhism—Holding True to the Original Intents of Buddha*, Venerable Master Hsing Yun expresses his perspective concerning propagating the Dharma through culture:

What Master Taixu and Venerable Tzu Hang both emphasized the importance of education, culture, and charity in the future of Buddhism. I have likewise established four objectives for the future development of Humanistic Buddhism:

1. To propagate Dharma through culture
2. To foster talents through education
3. To benefit society through charity
4. To purify human minds through spiritual cultivation.60,61

Music is an important component of culture, and an important vehicle for Dharma propagation. In his words, Venerable Master Hsing Yun expressed the attention he pays to Buddhist culture. Engaging in Buddhist activity through voice and propagating the Dharma through songs, Fo Guang Shan’s Buddhist music is a topic very worthy of further study, but few are currently engaged in doing so. If we can more fully and accurately record the musical scores of Fo Guang Shan’s Buddhist chanting and systematically research the history of Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s Buddhist songs, it would indeed be of much historical and contemporary significance.

Notes

2. 江浙滬梵唄 -Ed.
4. Cited from a recording of the television program “One Hundred Lessons on Monastery Languages and Affairs.”
7. Respectively the 〈弘法者之歌〉、〈祈求〉、〈快皈投佛陀座下〉、〈信心門之歌〉、〈西方〉、〈甘露歌〉. -Ed.
8. 「我五音不全，不會唱歌，但我一直提倡用梵唄唱誦弘法、用歌唱音樂傳教，因為佛教不是為我個人而有，而是為眾生需要。」-Ed.
11. 「阿彌陀佛身金色，相好光明無等倫。白毫宛轉五須彌，絳目澄清四大海。光中化佛無數億，化菩薩眾亦無邊。四十八願度眾生，九品咸令登彼岸。」-Ed.
「慈悲喜捨遍法界，惜福結緣利人天，禪淨戒行平等忍，慚愧感恩大願心。」

始有魏陳思王曹植，深愛聲律，屬意經音。既通般遮之瑞響，又感魚山之神製。於是刪治《瑞應本起》，以為學者之宗。傳聲則三千有餘，在契則四十有二。

Shi Huijiao (Liang dynasty), Biographies of Eminent Monks (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1992), 507.

「對於佛教的弘法，貧僧覺得空談玄論不是很重要，重要的是，學習歷代的那許多古德，為佛教文化藝術奉獻的精神。」

Hsing Yun, Venerable Master Hsing Yun Discusses Wisdom (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2008), 7.

「往昔一別，各奔西東，何時能再相逢? 同堂共學，吾道不窮，盼望魚雁常通。努力奮鬥，立德立功，前途要自珍重。興教創業，全始全終，且喜志合道同；為教爭光，為己爭榮，要把佛法興隆；弘法利生，闡揚宗風，但願時能相逢。」

「緣起則聚則成，緣滅則散則消」

在它的中國文版中，這兩行是 “怎能忘記舊日朋友，心中能不懷想，舊日朋友豈能相忘，友誼地久天長”，這稍微不同的意義。-Ed.


宋《高僧傳》-Ed.

宋《高僧傳》-Ed.

Zan Ning (Song dynasty), Biographies of Eminent Monks (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1987), 632.