

THE CHINESE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

FORTY-SIXTH CONGREGATION

Conferment of the Degree of Doctor of Social Science, *honoris causa*

A Citation

The Rev Shih Cheng-yen

*"Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain."*

from *Dover Beach*

The words of Matthew Arnold would have struck a cord in young Wang Chin-yun's heart as she watched, in alarm, her adoptive mother suffer the agonies of a life-threatening illness. The teenager was frightened, horrified, and felt utterly helpless in the face of such massive pain being inflicted on one so dear to her. Like the heroine in Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair*, she prayed to her god in her hour of need; she offered to cut short her own life in exchange for a longer life for her suffering mother. Her prayer was answered and Mrs. Wang recovered. Five years later, it was Mr. Wang's turn to be taken ill all of a sudden and he died of a stroke.

Young Chin-yun, bereaved but not in any danger of destitution because his father had been a well-to-do cinema owner, roamed the streets of Taichung, Taipei, Taitung and Hualien in search of philosophical answers to the perennial enigma of life and death. She went to Tz'u Yun Temple and asked the abbot the fundamental question, "What kind of woman enjoys true happiness?" The abbot, in his infinite wisdom, told her, "She who carries a shopping basket in her hand." Not what the British call a basket case, but a housewife of the traditional kind.

This did not satisfy the longing of a soul yearning for commitment to some higher

ideal and loftier goal, for the young lady who posed the question was nothing if not unconventional. One of her disciples described Wang Chin-yun as thinking to herself thus on that occasion, "If women can be like men and can shoulder social responsibilities and extend their love of family to the whole humankind, they would be blessed indeed because this would really be true happiness." At this point, she probably also believed, like Thomas Hardy did, that "Though one can be happy at times, moments of gaiety are interludes, and no part of the actual drama."

Her conflicts with herself and with the conventional perception of the role of women temporarily put aside, Wang Chin-yun cut her own hair and became a nun at Pu Ming Temple in Hualien at the age of twenty-five. She was given the Buddhist name of Cheng-yen which means Solemn Testimony to the Way of the Buddha.

Life within the cloistered walls of Pu Ming Temple was extremely hard for the novice. The nuns were committed to earning their keep and live by the motto "an honest day's food for an honest day's work". What others might regard as a particularly hard life suited the Reverend Cheng-yen very well. She knitted, made shoes and envelopes in the day time and gave lectures on Buddhist teachings in the evening. She refused to be supported by contribution, nor did she and her group try to make money by accepting invitations to pray for the dead and departed.

Two things then happened in quick succession to make the Reverend Cheng-yen emerge from a cloistered existence to embrace fully an involved, participatory role in society. The first was when she witnessed, at first hand in a private hospital in Hualien, a woman who was suffering from miscarriage being turned away by hospital staff because she did not have the money for an operation. The second was a discussion she had with three Catholic nuns which ended in a debate on the respective merits of Buddhism and Christianity. The Catholic nuns, while conceding that Buddhism was probably a more intellectual religion with more philosophical teachings, pointed out that it was the Christian missions which were providing the schools and hospitals and engaging themselves in social work which constituted more concrete and more substantive help to the poor and destitute. The Buddhists, on the other hand, were preoccupied with their own spiritual world and their own salvation. In the face of such incontrovertible facts the Reverend Cheng-yen vowed to change the situation.

Her opportunity came when she was about to be transferred out of Hualien to a nunnery in another city. She told her congregation who worshipped her that if they wanted to keep her in Hualien, they would have to help her satisfy a need and yearning to serve the sick and the poor of the community. She believed in starting with a modest beginning. All she asked her congregation to do was to save fifty cents a day. For the novice nuns under her guidance, she asked each of them to make an extra pair of baby shoes; this brought in an additional four dollars. In one month, they managed to raise NT\$1,170. It was not a lot

of money, but words soon spread that a young nun had set out to help the poor and needy of this world and that she had chosen to do it not by asking for large sums of money and huge donations but by asking for a pittance, and a pittance only. The idea that every fifty cents helped soon captured the imagination of Hualien's basket carriers and with their modest but cumulative donations, the Tz'u-chi Contribution Society came into being in 1966.

With the money raised by such humble means, the Society proceeded to help the sick and infirm of the land. In the first year of operation, thirty-one people received help from the Contribution Society but the numbers soon increased by leaps and bounds, so much so that in 1979, the Reverend Cheng-yen believed she needed a whole hospital if she were to fulfil her dream. When she brought up the subject with Dr. Tseng Wen-ping, then deputy director of the National Taiwan University teaching hospital, Dr. Tseng said to her, "But you have no idea how difficult it is to build a hospital and how much trouble will follow after it is built!" The Reverend Cheng-yen persisted, however, and in 1986, at a cost of NT\$700 million, all donated by the faithful and the caring, the Tz'u-chi Buddhist General Hospital opened its doors to its first patients. The Reverend Cheng-yen now wants to build a university in Hualien and while many would want to warn her about the trouble which might follow, none would be so foolish as to underrate her chance of success.

Mr. Chancellor, in a little over twenty-seven years, the Reverend Cheng-yen's Tz'u-chi Contribution Society has helped over 1.3 million people across six continents. It is the most respected and trusted charity in Taiwan with a following of 2.6 million people. But the work of the Society extends beyond Taiwan to China, Japan, North America, South America, Britain, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Singapore, Malaysia and our city here, Hong Kong. The massive relief work which the Tz'u-chi Contribution Society undertook in China and Bangladesh when these two countries were ravaged by floods was truly phenomenal. Every year, the organization raises over NT\$3 billion and every penny is spent on helping the poor, the needy, the sick and the infirm. The Reverend Cheng-yen lives simply and to this day refuses to eat without first having worked. By her example, she has, in the words of an article in the *Reader's Digest*, "awakened modern Taiwan to the ancient Buddhist teachings of compassion and charity lost in the headlong rush to prosperity."

Mr Chancellor, the work of one person has made an enormous, major difference to the world we live in. The Reverend Cheng-yen, by the inspiration of her own efforts and example, has brought to the world joy, and love, and light, and certitude, and peace, and help for pain. For this and for the humble holiness in her heart, I present Shih Cheng-yen for the award of Doctor of Social Science, *honoris causa*.

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