

# Taiwan's Transnational Religious Philanthropy: Buddha's Light Mountain's Disaster Relief Activities after the 2016 Kumamoto Earthquake

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## Abstract

In a globalized world, the movement of goods, services, people and ideas across national and cultural boundaries has become more rapid. It is not only seen from the increasing economic, cultural, and political exchanges among different countries and regions, but also the growing presence of religious philanthropy on the global stage. This research note aims to further explore this little-studied topic by using a Taiwanese Buddhist organization, namely Buddha's Light Mountain (BLM) (佛光山 or Fo Guang Shan), as an example. The purpose of this note is to outline how BLM initiated relief activities in Kumamoto after it was struck by a powerful earthquake in 2016, based on official records and media reports.

**Key Words:** Transnational, philanthropy, Buddha's Light Mountain, Kumamoto

## 1. Introduction

Religious groups have a long history of philanthropic engagement. In medieval Europe, monasteries and churches were the primary providers of shelters and relief in times of crisis. Nowadays, Christian NGOs are still the major provider of social and welfare services in Europe and North America (e.g., Beckman et al., 2004; Cnaan & Boddie, 2002). In China, the history of Buddhist philanthropy can be traced as early as the East Han Dynasty (25~220 CE), when temples helped the poor and victims of natural disasters (Lin, 2017). The active participation of religious groups in charity and philanthropy can be attributed to the idea of altruism; religious leaders and members believe that they have a strong obligation to give and to help people in need (Neusner & Chilton, 2005).

With the advance of globalization, religious philanthropy is becoming increasingly transnational. Religious groups have crossed national and cultural boundaries to promote philanthropic activities, such as building hospitals, schools, and welfare facilities in less-developed regions, and providing medical services and recovery and relief efforts to regions affected by natural disasters. Even though there is a growing presence of transna-

tional Chinese religious organizations on the global stage. In recent decades, studies on their philanthropic activities are still inadequate. In view of this, this research note aims to further explore this little-studied topic by using a Taiwanese Buddhist organization, namely Buddha's Light Mountain (BLM) (佛光山 or Fo Guang Shan), as an example. The purpose of this note is to outline BLM's relief activities in Kumamoto after it was struck by a powerful earthquake in 2016, based on official records and media reports.

The main reason for using BLM as a case study is that it is one of the most successful Buddhist philanthropic organizations in the world. The second reason is that Kaohsiung, the headquarters of BLM, is one of the nine "friendly cities" of Kumamoto, symbolizing the strong ties between the two cities and BLM.

## 2. Buddha's Light Mountain in Taiwan and Overseas

Buddha's Light Mountain (BLM) is founded in 1967 by a Chinese monk called Hsing Yun, with its headquarters located in Dashu District, Kaohsiung. It is one of the largest new Buddhist movements in Taiwan along with Dharma Drum Mountain, Tzu Chi, and Chung Tai Shan. BLM is actively engaged in social and charitable activities in Taiwan, operating a large number of schools, medical facilities, elderly homes, and nursery homes. In 1992, the Buddha's Light International Association (BLIA) was established to promote Buddhism and Buddhist philanthropic activities overseas. It was granted the NGO association status by the United Nations in 2003.

BLM has gained popularity in Japan because of its contribution to the relief activities in the Tohoku area after the 311 Eastern Japan Earthquake. In 2011, the Eastern part of Japan was hit by a 9.1-magnitude earthquake, followed by a series of tsunamis and a nuclear meltdown. Immediately after the triple-disaster, BLM started raising funds and coordinated with its Japanese branches to begin relief efforts. Between March and July, BLM collected five hundred tons of relief materials and hundreds of millions of Japanese dollars and sent them to the disaster areas. BLM branches in Tokyo, Yokohama, Yamanashi, Gunma, Nagoya, Osaka, Fukuoka, and Aomori mobilized their members to go to the affected areas to help the people in need (BLIA, 2012). The details of BLM's relief activities after the 311 Tohoku Earthquake are published in a booklet titled *Bodhisattva's Heart and Bodhisattva's Acts*. BLM's contributions to the disaster relief have earned the organization a positive image in Japanese society (BLIA, 2012: 108).

### 3. BLM's Relief Activities in Kumamoto

Kumamoto was rocked by a 6.2-magnitude earthquake on 14 April 2016, followed by a 7.0-magnitude earthquake on 16 April, leaving 50 people dead and 3,129 injured. More than 200,000 people affected by the earthquake had to take refuge in shelters, who desperately needed supplies like food, clean water, and hygiene items. Thanks to the experience BLM gained in 2011, the Buddhist organization was able to respond promptly to the Kumamoto earthquake. In only one day, BLM's Compassion Foundation and BLIA gathered information about the needs of refugees and collected a large number of relief materials, including 5000 blankets, 5000 torches, and medical masks, which were sent to the affected areas in only a few days. The second batch of relief resources including toothpaste, toothbrush, medical masks, and napkins also arrived at Kumamoto a few days later (The Merit Times, 2016).

The first batch of materials arrived at Kumamoto on 19 April. Master Yilai of BLM's Benevolence Yuan recalled that when BLM members were informed about the news of Kumamoto Earthquake, they put down their work at once and committed themselves to the preparation and packaging of relief materials day and night. Master Yilai said, "When someone needs us, BLM will be there to help" (The Merit Times, 2016). It is also worth noting that BLM could respond and send their relief resources to Kumamoto in such a short period because of the help they received from China Airlines. The Taiwanese airline company offered full support to BLM and provided free storage in their aircrafts for the transportation of relief materials. In fact, China Airlines has maintained a good relationship with BLM as the company agrees with the Buddhist idea of benevolence and the positive effects that Buddhism brings to individuals and society. The CEO, chairman, and staff members of the company visited BLM headquarters every year, where they take Buddhist lectures and practice meditation (The Merit Times, 2014)

BLM branches in Japan also started to coordinate relief efforts on 14 April after the first earthquake struck Kumamoto. Japanese Buddhist monks and members from BLM took part in relief activities. Also, when the resources from Taiwan arrived at Fukuoka, BLM Fukuoka temple and BLIA Fukuoka Association helped transport them to Mashikimachi, one of the affected areas in the earthquake. Buddhist monks from BLM Japan also provided psycho-spiritual counseling to people whose lives were badly affected by the earthquakes (taiwancnan, 2016). Mr. Hsieh, the member representative of Hosui Temple BLM in Japan and CEO of Yugen, a trading company, described the coordination of relief

efforts was a race against time. His company prepared 200 boxes of medical masks and 5000 lunch boxes and sent them to the affected areas with the help of Kagoshima Business Federation. With the support of BLM Japanese members, BLM in Japan was able to collect 1000 boxes of drinking water, napkins, tissue paper, sanitary items, which were sent to the BLM Fukuoka branch and then distributed to different areas affected by the disaster (Taiwan, 2016).

#### 4. Discussion

The relief activities of BLM in Kumamoto was made possible because of the following three reasons. First, BLM has been well prepared to engage in disaster relief activities because of their past experiences, such as the 2010 Haiti earthquake, the 2011 Tohoku earthquake, and 2015 Nepal earthquake. An emergency response team is set up in a fast manner to coordinate relief efforts including the logistics of relief materials and the contacting of overseas branches. In the case of Kumamoto earthquake, the first batch of resources was ready to take off to Fukuoka just one day after the quake. Its prompt reaction to Kumamoto earthquake suggests that BLM has acquired the know-how of disaster response through past experiences.

The second reason refers to the rather successful internationalization of BLM. In Japan alone, branches of BLM were established in Tokyo, Yokohama, Yamanashi, Gunma, Nagoya, Osaka, Fukuoka, and Aomori. As seen from the Kumamoto case, the BLM Fukuoka branch took the lead to coordinate relief activities with members from all over Japan. The relief resources sent from Taiwan were first received by the Fukuoka branch and then distributed to different areas. The extensive network of BLM branches all over Japan allows the organization to react promptly when natural disasters strike Japan.

Thirdly, BLM has maintained a friendly relationship with China Airlines. Even though BLM successfully prepared the first batch of resources in only one day, it would have been useless if the resources had not been sent out immediately to reach the people in need. China Airlines played an important role in this regard by offering full support to BLM in the transportation process. The airline company arranged a flight departing to Fukuoka for BLM and allowed the organization to use the storage of their aircraft for free. Transnational philanthropic activities, especially disaster relief efforts, often require the transportation of human and material resources to different places. The prompt reaction of BLM would have been impossible without the help of other agents, such as China Airlines and

other transportation companies.

## 5. The Future of BLM's Transnational Philanthropy

BLM has been active in promoting charity and philanthropy across national and cultural boundaries. As the movement of goods, people, and information are getting freer and more rapid along with globalization, BLM is expected to play a more active role on the global stage of philanthropy. For instance, with the establishment of BLIA and overseas branches all over the world, BLM has become more responsive to global issues, such as environmental problems, and medical and education problems in developing countries.

The increasing presence of BLM in transnational philanthropic activities is also related to the rise of risk society (Beck, 1992). Environmental problems and natural disasters are happening on a global scale. A single problem or event that happen in one part of the world also have effects on other parts of the world. The idea that government can manage all the risks for its people is no longer true, as seen from the failure of the Japanese government in handling the 311 earthquake. As the government can no longer manage risks effectively, our life is becoming more vulnerable to various risk factors, especially those on a large and global scale. The role of the family as a primary welfare provider is also weakened by changes in household structure. As a result, individuals will have fewer resources available for hedging risks. Religious groups, which bonds people together by a common faith and promote philanthropy based on altruism, may fill the weakening role of government and family in dealing with risks.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

The primary purpose of this note is to outline the relief activities of BLM in Kumamoto after it was hit by earthquakes in 2016. BLM's relief efforts in Kumamoto include the donation of relief resources by both the Taiwanese BLM headquarters and the Japanese BLM branches, as well as the psycho-spiritual support offered by Japanese monks to people affected by the earthquakes. BLM's reaction to the Kumamoto earthquake was fast because of three reasons: (1) past experiences in the relief activities in Haiti, Tohoku of Japan, and Nepal; (2) extensive networks of BLM branches in Japan to coordinate relief efforts; and (3) support from China Airlines in the transportation of relief materials. As environmental problems and natural disasters are happening on a large and global scale, the

ability of government and family in dealing with these risks is no longer sufficient. With the rise of risk society, religious philanthropic activities that transcend national and cultural boundary are expected to play an increasingly important role as in the case of BLM.

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