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ORGANIZED EXPRESSION
NEW RESEARCH: REVITALIZING AND CONSERVING TRADITIONS

Proceedings of the 3rd Symposium of the ICTM
Study Group on Performing Arts of Southeast Asia

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Mohd Anis Md Nor

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Patricia Matusky, Tan Sooi Beng, Jacqueline Pugh-Kitingan, Made Hood

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GESTURING SCRIPTURE AS COMMUNITY PERFORMANCE
(Lightning Paper)

Year End Blessing by Tzu Chi Foundation

Tzu Chi Foundation focuses on community service and outreach programs, and the Foundation operates its own television channel, “Da Ai”. Drama, dance and Taiwanese opera are utilized to promote missions of Tzu Chi. As opposed to other Buddhist organizations, Tzu Chi promotes the teaching of Buddhism through a practical approach that is concerned with material values rather than a spiritual existence such as meditation or pure recitation of a sutra or scripture.

Year End Blessing (YEB) 2012 and 2013, which was replicated from the Taiwanese headquarters, was organized respectively on January 2013 at Stadium Melawati, Shah Alam and December 2013 at Bukit Jalil Putra Indoor Stadium, Kuala Lumpur. The YEB series had been initiated since the 1960s in Taiwan, when the Foundation commenced Winter Distribution by volunteers to poor families. From family-scale gatherings, it evolved into broad-scaled assemblies to share what had been achieved over the years. The events were deliberately designed to include many aspects, especially religious protocols to develop pious and solemn surroundings. The duration of the events last around 90 – 140 minutes, and is watched by over 15,000 audiences for each live event. Full video documentation, including the processes of preparation and participants and audience feedback is carried out by the organization. The edited video footage with a carefully prepared script is broadcasted on “Da Ai”, the official website, and on YouTube before and after the productions.

There were specific themes for the ceremonies that was based on selected Buddhist sutras. The sutras provided inspiration for the artistic development of the events. The adaptation of *The Sutra of the Water Repentance*, and the *Sutra of the Immeasurable Meanings* were the themes for YEB 2012 and 2013. New Buddhist devotional songs, adapted from the sutras, were composed to fit into the scriptures. Songs were all composed in Western musical styles and free from the usual nature of monastic chanting.

Gesturing the Scripture

Gesturing in scripture recitation is a significant cultural feature of the Tzu Chi members as they believe that metaphorical inscription of gestures cannot be separated from the textual tradition. The door-plane—dimension—gesture was designed by the experts from the headquarters. Arms, hands, fingers, head and upper torso are utilized. The kinesphere of a performer is minimal; just an adequate amount of space around the body that can move without touching another person or object – self-space.

The gesture design is based on lyrical-Chinese characters scripture and Chinese Han characters called logograms. For an example, *Bei* means sorrow or sad, and is presented with a pictorial approach by both index fingers, middle fingers and ring fingers pointing at each other, and 人人 (human) is depicted by the left index finger touching the middle of the right index finger. Besides this pictorial presentation, imagery-verb approach is utilized. For example, 人 is also signified by a thumb up. 爱 or love, is signified by a palm caressing circularly behind a thumb up. The action literally shows the palm lovingly touching a human (thumb). Such dramatic actions that manipulate the thumb up as human (ren) makes sense as many verbs are related to humans as shenjiao (to teach) and yang (to feed someone). From these examples, it can be seen that recognizing Chinese characters and meanings associated with the particular character is essential to rationalizing the gestures, and to coordinate between the physical action and verbal recitation. Scripture and iconographical notation with written description are distributed to the performers. Thus, the scripture serves as memory aid to the performers, and by understanding the motifs behind the movement, privileges those who understand Han characters.

The gestures are stylized and standardized in terms of level, direction, duration and involved body parts. The gestures can be combined with walking steps, knee bends, turning torsos and bending in order to create floor patterns or shapes associated with Buddhist’s philosophy. The choreographic work