

## Article

# Secularity and Transformation of the Faith-Based Community: Ethnography of the Religious Charity of Baha'i in Macau

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**Abstract:** Since the 1970s, religious charities in Chinese communities have gradually become public and rational, transforming from previously raising donations for the temples or disaster relief. Even in mainland China, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam all began to enter the secular society after the 1980s and gradually merged into local public life by providing public welfare. Little attention has been paid to Baha'i, which originated in Iran in the middle of the 19th century and has become one of the most rapidly expanding new religions in the world. Based upon the ethnography of a Baha'i group in Macau, we first introduce the development of Baha'i, its activities and its charity services. In considering this example, we engage with the following questions. As a new world religion, why would Baha'i carry out these charity events? How did it begin its charity activities in Macau? How do charity activities convey its religious philosophy and religious practice? How should we interpret these religious charity practices? This exploratory research on a religious group in Macau revealed that the modern religion derives publicity and rationalization from its strong driving force for secularization, that the believers are also increasingly emphasizing their social and cultural citizenship, and that the religious organization is also gradually transforming into a networked faith-based community.

**Keywords:** Baha'i; religious charity service; Macau; China

## 1. Introduction

Since ancient times Chinese people have a profound tradition of helping the poor and the weak, accumulating virtue and doing good deeds (Tsu [1912] 1968). These charity activities are often associated with Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. Japanese scholar Fuma Susumu pointed out that the previous studies in this area tended to judge from the perspective of the Western Christian world, drawing conclusions that there was a lack of true charity in China because of the absence of Christianity (Fuma 2005). However, this view has been criticized by many scholars since the 1990s (for example, Liang 2001; Smith 2009; Rankin 1986). In fact, not only do Chinese traditional religions provide cultural resources for people's charity awareness, but also, China has constantly absorbed the ideas of Catholicism, Islam, some emerging religions and other religions from the west to develop its own philanthropy since modern times, which have become an important part of China's welfare system.

However, the discourse and the practice of religious charity in China, whether local or absorbing Western religious ideas and transforming local practice, were significantly different from Western religious charity. The highly centralized government was alert to religions, so religious charity was usually confined to the believers or inside the temples, and generally played an auxiliary role in

relieving the poor only in times of great disaster. Only in the last 40 years have some religions, such as Buddhism, Christianity and Islam, began to emerge out of their own temples, churches and mosques, carrying out charity activities for the public. They also began to establish professional charity organizations to promote their professionalized and rationalized charity activities. There are many studies on the secularization of these religions in China, but more attention should be paid to Baha'i, which originated in Iran in the middle of the 19th century and has become one of the most rapidly expanding new religions in the world.

The Baha'i in Macau is a typical case that is examined in this ethnographic study. Analyzing this case engages with the following questions. How do the Baha'i carry out their community services? How is the followers' faith cultivated in the process of community services? These questions are worth further exploration. Based on a two-year field investigation, this paper attempts to describe and analyze the discourse and the practice of this religious charity. Firstly, the development of Baha'i in Macau is introduced, and then follows an introduction to the charity service of Baha'i in Macau. The last part explores what kind of physical and mental training the followers can get in the charity service, how religion is involved in secular life through charity activities, and what kind of impact it has on the followers.

### *Background and Theoretical Framework*

This section reviews theoretical frameworks for understanding religiosity within existing scholarship. Durkheim (2006) defined religion as a unified system of belief and practice related to the sacred. What is classified as sacred are matters considered to be taboo. Belief and practice unite all believers into a moral group called the church (Durkheim 2006). Durkheim classified religion into belief and practice. From the perspective of practice, religion is, to some extent, an important ideological source and implementation subject of charity, and charity also brings prosperity and development to religion. This is also true in China. For example, Zheng Xiaoyun believes that charity is the proposition of Chinese religions, and charity activities are the external and social symbol of religious charity ideas (Weller et al. 2001). Zhang Shijiang says that the development of modern public welfare charities, such as foundations, private non-profit organizations and volunteer services, are all related to religion, either originating from religion or deeply influenced by religion (Weller et al. 2001). Liu Peifeng believes that religion and charity have the same origin: benevolence, compassion, and helping the needy are all common characteristics in religion and charity (Weller et al. 2001). Different religions also regard charity and its rewards as one of the approaches by which to reach higher levels (Weller et al. 2001).

This understanding is different from the view of religious charity in the United States. Although at the initial stage, religious charity activities in the United States were not independent of the church, with the rise and maturity of modern civil society and the emergence of a diversified 'belief supermarket,' the influence of religion has been weakened in many fields of society (Zhao 2008). Some religious charity organizations have gradually separated from the leadership of the Catholic Church. The spirit of religious charity is combined with modern civil society's autonomous organization, thus forming professional charity organizations (de Tocqueville 1989; Davis 2013). This kind of professional charitable organization does not completely eliminate the link with religious organizations and faith-based communities, but this understanding transforms faith into the culture and belief of those specific organizations (Curti 1957).

Historically, from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, the transformation of religious charity in the United States was synchronous with the change in religious charity in modern China, because, at that time, western missionaries came to China and exploited the power of religious charity to promote the modernization of education, medical care, sports and other undertakings. For example, the names of Yenching University, Fu Jen University, Soochow University, Zhen Dan College, Union Medical College, Guangji Hospital, Renji Hospital, Tongren Hospital, and more are closely related to the modernization of Chinese society, and record the glory and contribution of religious charity in China (Yang 2010). Religious charity in modern China reflected the publicity and

rationalization of religious activities (Qin 2008), but some scholars believe that such religious charity was designed for missionary purpose, which allowed the imperialist countries to expand religious influence by means of charity activities in China (Jiang 2008).

Generally, and compared with other types of charity, religious charity in China has three special advantages: a solid foundation of faith, a rich tradition and high moral appeal and public credibility (Pei 2008). Therefore, since the 21st century, the Chinese government has gradually opened up to religious charity, and the government hopes to form institutionalized, normalized and specialized religious charities (Weller et al. 2001). For that purpose, Huang Jianbo believes that it is necessary to legislate to protect the rights of religious believers and religious organizations for non-religious activities, thus contributing to religious freedom (Huang 2005).

Cumulative, these studies indicate that religious charity in Chinese society has gradually become professional and public, but most of these studies are at the macro level or from policy perspectives, lacking detailed research on religious charities. This paper aims to advance the field by addressing the dearth of studies attending to micro-processes, in particular by engaging in an ethnographic study of the motivations of Baha'i in Macau. As one of the fastest growing and most widely spread new religions in the world, the rise of Baha'i has attracted global attention. For example, a book, entitled *Baha'i Faith: an Emerging World Religion*, traces back to the birth and development of Baha'i in Persia, and describes its doctrines, laws and organizational system in detail, with an emphasis on the core idea of Baha'i 'Great Harmony of the world' and Baha'u'llah's concept of new world order (Hatcher and Martin 1985). Furthermore, a book, entitled *New Dawn of Mankind: Baha'i Faith*, also corrects Chinese mainland scholars' misunderstanding that Baha'i is only a branch of Islam (Li 2010). Additionally, Cai Degui established China's first Baha'i research center in Shandong University in 1996, and published a book, entitled *Studies on the Contemporary New Religion Baha'i*, which analyzed the reasons for the rapid spread of Baha'i in China. Since then, academic seminars on Baha'i have been held many times. A large number of studies have focused on the classics and doctrines of Baha'i, its ethics and morality, and its secularity, cosmopolitanism and modernity (Cai 2001).

Moreover, Jin Yijiu believes that Baha'i is a new religion with obvious secularity, whose proposition of 'human integration' and relevant laws and obligations indicate that the Baha'i religious community shows its religious belief to the world by the personal practice of believers, and reflects its divinity by secular activities (Jin 1997). Plus, Tarant Mahony, focusing on the historical view of Baha'i religion, discusses the view of Baha'i on the history of human development, and points out that Baha'i emphasizes the decisive role of the prophet in the creation of history. Similarly, Nosrat Muhammad Hosseini discussed the historical process of the Babu Movement and the significance of Babu as a spiritual leader of the Babu Movement and Baha'i in his speech entitled "The Dual Claims of Babu" (Li 2004b). Furthermore, Li Weijian believes that the Baha'i Faith is a new kind of modern religion. Its modernity is mainly manifested in the weakening of religious spirituality, the enhancement of secularity, the simplification of religious rituals and the democratization of religious organizations (Li 2004a). However, these studies on Baha'i are still focused on the discussion of doctrines and rituals, with a lack of attention to the real practice of Baha'i or its religious charity. In summary, the relationship of religiosity and charity in China deserves special attention, and the Baha'i faith is an important contemporary religion that deserves careful attention. Thus, this study engaged in an ethnographic investigation of Baha'i believers in Macau in order to obtain a better understanding of their motivations for giving.

## 2. Ethnographic Methods

In order to study people's religious life practice, it is important to study their daily life and spiritual belief practice to observe and experience as they do. Therefore, this study employed the anthropological fieldwork method to conduct participatory observation in the process of fieldwork, and collected unstructured and semi-structured interviews with key reporters and Baha'i believers.

The field data in this paper were primarily from the fieldwork conducted by the research team in Macau for 11 months from 2011 to 2013.

In order to enter the life world of the Baha'i, and obtain the internal vision of the culture bearers, the research team became acquainted with a Baha'i couple through an introduction from a friend. They then connected the researchers with a Baha'i study group. Gradually, the Baha'i community opened up to and connected with the research team. After establishing trust, the researchers were able to closely observe the daily life of the Baha'i followers, and participate in their daily activities, such as prayer meetings, spiritual assemblies, exchange meetings, and study groups. Through this process, the researchers gained a deep understanding of their charity activities and their views on the relationship and transformation between spiritual belief and community service. The team also participated in the youth summer camp of the School of the Nations organized by the Badi foundation in Macau.

During the research process, the research team also conducted in-depth interviews with over 30 important informants, which augmented the ethnographic fieldwork by gaining greater insight into their understanding of the relationship between their faith and the community services. The interviewees were: (1) the staff of Macau Baha'i General Assembly; (2) the Baha'i followers in Macau of different ages; (3) the staff of the Badi Foundation; (4) the staff of the School of the Nations.

In addition, the research team also collected literature materials from the community, such as annual reports, e-magazines and other internal materials of the Macau Baha'i General Assembly and the Badi foundation. The contents of these materials involve the community service projects, charity activities, and the operation of the Badi foundation and its project. Some information about the School of the Nations derives from these materials. Combined, these ethnographic methods—fieldnotes, interviews, archival materials—informed the following results.

### 3. Baha'i in Macau: The Secularity of Secularized Religion

Based on this ethnographic research, this section presents an analysis of the history of Baha'i in Macau, beginning first with its global history.

#### 3.1. Global History

Baha'i is a relatively new religion. Compared with the traditional world religions, such as Christianity, Islam and Buddhism, the so-called emerging religion Baha'i was born in Iran and Persia in 1844. Although it has an Islamic background, its founder Baha'u'llah was expelled after it was established. Since its origin, Baha'i has spread worldwide, becoming one of the world's religions in just 160 years. It has more than 5 million followers in more than 200 countries and regions, distributed in more than 100,000 locations around the world. Its geographical distribution is only second to Christianity, and it is also the youngest among the major world religions. Macau is an important area for Baha'i Chinese followers (Wu 2008).

Baha'i emphasizes three basic principles: one God, one origin of different religions and one family of mankind. The basic concepts developed from the three principles include: eliminating prejudice, gender equality, oneness of world religions, eliminating extreme poverty, universal education, harmony between science and religion, maintaining a balance between protecting nature and developing technology, and establishing a world federal system based on the principle of collective security and one family of mankind. Stemming from these basic doctrines, Baha'i is concerned with many problems in the contemporary world and has strong characteristics of secularity.

Cai Degui identified that the secularization tendency of Baha'i appeared in the initial stage of the Babu Movement (Cai 2001). Since the formal establishment of Baha'i, it has gradually become a 'secular religion' and a universal religion after persistent efforts over three generations, i.e., Baha'u'llah, Abdubaha and Shaoke Afandi. In Cai's view, Baha'i is the most modern religion, and 'its modernity is all reflected on its positive response to modernization, and its earliest attempt to complete the transformation from traditional to modern'. Li Weijian believes that Baha'i is a new modern religion,

and its modernity is mainly manifested in the weakening of religious spirituality, the enhancement of secularity, the simplification of religious rituals, and the democratization of religious organizations (Li 2004a). Nowadays, traditional religions also have many characteristics of secularity, but Baha'i strongly emphasises itself as 'a religion of secular people'.

In its organizational form, the secularization of Baha'i is mainly manifested in the following aspects. First, similar to some churches of Pentecostal Christianity, it has no specialized clergy or professional missionaries. Secondly, it has a global educational management system with three administrative subjects. In terms of administration, Baha'i adopts an electoral system and a consultative system, and in this way, its operational system and mode are closer to a faith-based social group than other traditional religions. Thirdly, Baha'i identifies with other religions and believes in 'one origin of different religions'. Its highest goal is to seek 'the Great Harmony of mankind and all under heaven are one family' (Li 2010).

### 3.2. History of Baha'i in Macau

The Baha'i in Macau has the above characteristics, plus these additional features. Before the coming of Baha'i, Macau was dominated by Christianity, especially Catholics, since it had been a colony of Portugal for more than 400 years. Catholicism shaped the culture and belief of Macau people, along with the local Daoism and Buddhism. The diversity of religions is a special characteristic of Macau. In 1953, a female Californian Baha'i follower named Frances Heller came to Macau for pioneering work, and soon an American couple from Wisconsin, Carl and Loretta Scherer, also arrived (Sims 1991). In October 1954, a Chinese from Guangdong Province named Yan Peifeng formally converted to Baha'i. After that appeared the first Portuguese follower. In 1955, Miss Tang Tongrong became the first female Baha'i follower in Macau, and then her husband, Mr. Zhang Shaozai, also joined. In 1958, the first local spiritual assembly was established in Macau, with four Portuguese, three Chinese and two American members. In 1960, all nine members were Chinese. In 1974, the number of followers increased to over 50, and the Baha'i center was set up in Bay View Building, which was subordinate to the general spiritual assembly of Baha'i in Hong Kong. A Baha'i center was set up in 1984, and a local spiritual assembly was also established in the same year, which was the second local spiritual assembly in Macau. In 1988, the third local spiritual assembly was set up. On April 29, 1989, Mrs. Rabbani, the representative and spiritual leader of the Baha'i world center, went to Macau to attend 'the Baha'i annual meeting in Macau' held at the Macau International Exhibition Center on April 30, 1989. At this meeting, nine members who formed the first general spiritual assembly in Macau were selected. An office was set up, collecting opinions of the members in different districts and making plans for further development.

Although the history of the Baha'i community in Macau is only roughly 60 years, it has become one of the religions, alongside Christianity, Buddhism and Taoism, on the small island of Macau. Nowadays, there is a general assembly and three branches in Macau, with more than 2000 followers. The Baha'i in Macau can be said to be a typical case of the Baha'i religion in the Chinese community.

### 3.3. Features of Contemporary Baha'i in Macau

Baha'i advocates for eliminating corruption and poverty, creating more job opportunities, opposing begging and asking for self-reliance, eliminating prejudice among all ethnic groups, religions, classes, countries and genders, advocating for equality between men and women, monogamous marriage, and believing that human beings are born with noble qualities, such as sincerity and trustworthiness, and can work hard, live happily and uphold justice through worship to the Creator. The Baha'i in Macau believe that it is the trend in this era for human beings to drive to maturity. The mission of Baha'i is to turn the ideas above into reality. It requires the establishment of a more united and just civilization. In order to make such a social ideal become a reality, Baha'i insists on developing the ability to work with others, starting with small activities.



In the ethnographic data, Dr. Siew-Huat Kong from the University of Macau, chairman of the Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Macau, reported, 'Baha'i does not have the atmosphere and color of traditional religions, but it is still an independent and complete religion. It has the basic elements of religion, including scriptures, rituals, prayer, etc., and it also has its own monthly and yearly calendar. It believes in the existence of God and believes that man is immortal and the soul is immortal. The soul is combined with the body in this world. The activity in this world is to prepare for the next world. The preparation includes participation in social construction and service, capacity building, etc. The Baha'i community opposes the practice of seclusion, encouraging the followers to improve their abilities by participating in social activities. On the whole, Baha'i does not emphasize the sacred way, but the secular way'.

### 3.4. Analysis of Ethnographic Results

Pairing the results of the above analysis of ethnographic data with existing scholarship, it can be seen that, as a new religion, Baha'i has distinct characteristics of secular religions. Generally, secularization refers to 'the 'desacrilization' of religion and the 'disenchantment' of traditional concept of the sacred' (Zhuo 2002, p. 4). The retreat from and decoding of sacred symbols is 'the process of disenchantment or rationalization of the world' (Zhuo 2002, p. 5). In this process, not only do many aspects of social life gradually lose the influence of religion, but also religion itself has to adapt to secular values, or go back to private spiritual life (Wang 2010). As Dai Kangsheng identified, 'Baha'i shows great inclusiveness, openness and universality. Because of its concise doctrine, simplified etiquette, flexible organization, concern for society, emphasis on ethics and practical action, it has strong adaptability to modern social life, so it is more energetic and has certain attraction to people from all walks of life in society' (Dai 1999, p.135). It advocates for active participation in various social activities and promotes activities conducive to environmental protection, basic education, literacy movement, women's rights, child development, health education, agricultural development, economic construction and so on (Feng 2004). However, Baha'i has religious creeds such as belief in God and immortality, keeping its faith in the supernatural, but more of its propositions are embodied in its social ethics, advocating for social practice. One of the 'laws and obligations' of Baha'i is that 'work is worship, and service is prayer'. In summary, this ethnographic analysis revealed that the Baha'i religious tradition is complex in that it is at once both historical and contemporary, secularized and faith-filled, engaged in this-worldly and other-worldly phenomenon, carrying forward the traditions of the past and simultaneously challenging and changing these traditions. For this reason, it is important to further analyze its structure and operation as a faith community.

## 4. Structure and Operation as a Faith Community

### 4.1. Governance and Funding

Under the principle of "consultation democracy", the administrative structure of the Baha'i community in Macau is divided into two parts. The first part is an elected educational administration institution, including the Macau Baha'i General Assembly, and three local branches: Macau Peninsula Baha'i Branch, Taipa Baha'i Branch and Luhuan Baha'i Branch. The second part is the accompanying learning institution with an appointment system in each district. There are counselors in each district, and there is a support group in each community, whose role is to help members understand and improve their faith. The counselors do not participate in decision-making. The elected branch administration has decision-making rights. However, in our observation, this kind of "consultation democracy" is not easy and it needs constant adjustment and adaptation.

In terms of funding sources, the Baha'i community accepts donations as a source of funds. There are two types of donations. One type is for the internal activities of the diocese, which only accepts donations from members. The other type is for the public activities, such as holding seminars and schools, which can accept donations from the public.

#### 4.2. Membership and Leadership

It seems to be very simple to become a Baha'i follower. As long as an individual agrees with the idea of Baha'i and admits to being a follower, he or she becomes a member of the Baha'i community. The governance structure of the Baha'i community is also informal. Collective leadership is practiced, and the individual has no separable power. The group makes collective decisions by means of consultation. As the chairman of the Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Macau, Dr. Siew-Huat Kong reported that he has no particular privileges above other individuals. His main work is to coordinate meetings and get the members to work together, and it is the same with other leaders. They believe that participation in governance is an opportunity for learning and service. The staff of the assembly are divided into full-time employees and volunteers, but they only provide temporary services. One principle of Baha'i is to work, whether paid or unpaid. The work is voluntary or full-time service provided by members, and the assembly will provide a certain living allowance.

#### 4.3. Religious and Social Activities

In terms of activities, community activities can be divided into two categories. One is religious activities, mainly including (1) Baha'i open classes for children; (2) prayer meetings; (3) learning groups. The other is social services, which can be divided into three areas: (1) training for community capacity-building; (2) communication and dialogue; (3) social practice and social service. First, training methods include learning groups, children's character training, youth empowerment training, and various human resources training needed in the community. Training content includes how to build a community, such that the community can more fully reflect the ideas and spirit of Baha'i. Second, in terms of communication and dialogue, social ideas are discussed in order to promote social change. Communication is enhanced in multi-dimensions and multi-levels such as encouraging mutual visits. Exchanges and dialogues are carried out on issues or topics of common concern, trying to analyze and interpret problems by combining Baha'i ideas with existing knowledge. Exchanges of ideas by means of microblog, blog, column, seminar, publications, etc., have been incorporated into communication and dialogue. Third, in terms of social practice and social service, the Baha'i concept is put into action and translated into social and economic development projects.

The above three categories of social activities consist of three types of activities: one-time activities, regular activities and long-term activities. Examples of one-time activities include individual believers occasionally doing good deeds, metamorphose, helping neighbors, and donating. In terms of more regular activities, some examples include parent-child education activities and youth values training, both of which are held once or twice a year. For long-term activities, these usually need to be managed by some NGOs or foundations, such as the Badi Foundation and School of the Nations, which will be described in detail later.

In this regard, Baha'i is a typical "faith-based social organization" or "religious community". In addition to carrying out its religious activities, the community and its members devote a lot of energy to social activities and social services (Jin 2004). Besides serving the society enthusiastically, Baha'i attaches great importance to the development of education, which includes not only religious education but also secular scientific knowledge education and humanistic education. In other words, it is a secular community based on religious belief. These organizations give full play to social functions that other social organizations do not have, and play a social self-service and social coordination function, including the connotation of social service and the characteristics of welfare mutual assistance (Wang 2010).

#### 4.4. Faith in Action

To be a Baha'i means to systematically learn how to use the principles and concepts of faith to improve the quality of life of individuals and promote social harmony and prosperity. The founder of Baha'i has given guidance to many aspects of human activities, including interpersonal relations,

social organizations, the relationship between man and God, international affairs, spiritual problems and economic problems. Baha'i firmly believes that the well-being, prosperity, peace and unity of human society as a whole ultimately depend on the sustained efforts of many individuals and institutions. A person's belief is not only related to his own mental state, but also to his level of action. Therefore, Baha'i will naturally try to put its principles into practice in a suitable way. On the one hand, such a process can deepen one's understanding of the doctrine of Baha'i and strengthen belief. On the other hand, it can also improve one's ability and experience of serving the society.

The social service of the Baha'i community in Macau comes from this idea. It often organizes various community service projects, cooperating with the local communities and government departments to promote the spiritual and material progress of the community. The Baha'i groups in Macau have service departments such as the women's promotion agency, the ministry of youth, the education promotion agency, and so on. Their activities include promoting family unity, moral education for youth, rebuilding the production system of rural communities, creating new types of education, and so on. These activities are called "social and economic development projects".

Like the Catholic Jesuits and the Protestant Methodists, the Baha'i believe that community education is very important. They believe that by vigorously developing education they can achieve economic and social development and human progress, and finally set foot on the road to God. The education philosophy of Baha'i has a direct effect on its way of serving the community. The Baha'i of Macau are very active in community education and training, carrying out learning groups, children's class training, and youth empowerment training programs. For example, they also established the School of the Nations and Badi Foundation. In summary, enacting the faith tradition by concerted actions in service of others is key to Baha'i, and the moral education of young people is one of the highest community values.

#### 4.4.1. Badi Foundation

Founded in Macau in 1990, the Badi Foundation is an international non-profit non-governmental organization dedicated to unleashing the potential of individuals and institutions to promote community development in China. The foundation is committed to promoting the creation of civil society organizations and working with them to design and carry out education and training programs to help them develop the ability to work with the government to promote coordinated development. The foundation's first donation was to commemorate Badi'u'llah Farid and Shidrokh Amirkia Bagha, the two Baha'i followers who dedicated, served and even sacrificed themselves for the well-being of mankind. The projects carried out by the Badi Foundation in Macau mainly include the youth empowerment project and the School of the Nations, which educate and cultivate students' ability to serve the society and practise in society. On the Chinese mainland, in addition to the youth empowerment projects, there are also rural women's capacity-building projects to cultivate their ability and promote their contribution to community development. In addition, the Foundation has launched an institutional capacity-building project, which aims to promote the establishment of an increasing number of civil society organizations in China and to develop their ability to contribute to the sustainable development of local communities.

#### 4.4.2. School of the Nations

Of note is the School of the Nations, which is the first attempt of the Badi Foundation in the field of formal education. Founded in 1988 and approved by the Education Department of the Macau government, it is the first non-profit international education school founded by the Baha'i community. After the Badi Foundation was established, it was responsible for the management and development of the school. At present, the office of the Badi Foundation is also located in the School of the Nations. School enrollment is not limited to the Baha'i community, but to the whole society. Although the school itself was established before the Foundation was established, as soon as the foundation was established the school was transferred to the Foundation. As an important project of the Foundation,



it is responsible for the administrative management and development of the school. After several years of development, the scale of the school has gradually expanded and a set of unique formal education methods have been designed, focusing on comprehensive methods to promote the all-round development of the students in moral, intellectual and physical.

The educational philosophy of the School of the Nations is based on Baha'i's understanding and respect for human spirituality. They believe that every child is a treasure house. In the eyes of every teacher, children are noble. Even if they are naughty and lazy, their potential has not been exploited. Because of such a concept, the School of the Nations holds that education is a powerful means to tap individual potential, promote social change, cultivate students' necessary quality for civilization and progress, improve their quality and enhance their mental ability.

When the School of the Nations was founded, there were only five students, all of whom were enrolled in kindergarten. With the efforts of the Macau people and the government, the School of the Nations started quietly. In 1994, in order to meet the interests of Macau families, the school expanded, adding primary and secondary schools, and moved to a new school site, enrolling more than 200 students. In 2008, with the strong support of the Macau government, students' parents, alumni and other relevant people, the school built an advanced new campus, further expanded the scale of the school and improved its ability to serve the Macau community. Today, the school has two school buildings, which are located on Friendship Road and Gomes Street in Macau, providing a preschool education, preparatory class for primary education, and six-year education for primary and secondary school.

With the development of the school scale and resources, the schools evolved its unique formal education methods, which focus on promoting the all-round development of students' morality, intelligence and physique. It provides rigorous and internationally recognized teaching programs, including providing international degree certificates for the students of Grade 5 and 6, and providing junior high school education international certification for the students of Grade 3 and 4 who passed the Cambridge International Examination. In addition, from the outset, the school has integrated innovative personality development projects in its educational methods, some of which are developed and improved within the school, while others have learned from the project development and implementation experience of the Badi Foundation in China. The personality training program of the School of the Nations has been recognized by Macau and international education circles. In 1997, it won the first prize awarded by the Ministry of International Education and Community Service in Macau, and received third prize in the global community service project competition in 1997.

The internationalization and diversity of the school is also worth noting. Teachers, students and staff of all colors from different countries join together in forming an amicable community. To promote diversity, the School of the Nations does not require teachers and students to believe in Baha'i. They only need to identify with the teaching philosophy of the school. According to the school statistics, only about half of the teachers and students believe in Baha'i.

After entering the School of the Nations, one may feel that it is different from the general public schools in China, because most of their teaching methods are open format, such as group cooperation and group discussion. There are no rigid fixed desks and chairs in the classroom, but various open classrooms where desks and chairs can be freely combined and moved. There are no slogans on the walls of the corridor, but the artistic creations of students and graffiti on the walls. An art teacher of the school said the students should give full play to their strengths and imagination, and the school tries to satisfy the needs of students by the available resources, such as the walls. A painting on the wall was created by a student of the school who needed to participate in a painting competition. The school provided a white wall for him to practice. This shows the openness to students. Meanwhile, the painting adds vibrant colors to the school. In addition, the school has set up all the courses from kindergarten, primary school, junior high school to senior high school. In the building, there is one grade on each floor, for example, the kindergarten is on the top floor, and the high school is on the

ground floor. Students in every grade study and live in an orderly way. There is also an outdoor sports ground, swimming pool, performing arts hall, computer room and other facilities.

The school's curriculum is mainly in English and Putonghua. Teachers are proud of not only the good conditions of the school itself, but also the courses they provide. In addition to the regular courses of moral, intellectual, physical and professional cultural knowledge, the School of the Nations focuses on cultivating students' ability for social service and social practice, thereby adopting the experience of Baha'i and Badi Foundation. This requires that the students of each grade have different levels of social service time as a part of the required curriculum.

The school curriculum has three characteristics: emphasizing the importance of service, paying attention to scientific knowledge and teaching in English and Putonghua. In 1990, the school began to offer moral education courses, which were promoted in the first to sixth grade of middle school. The course consists of three parts. The first part is allows students to obtain real and practical experience by serving society. The second part is to make a comprehensive plan to enable students to participate in providing various services, so that students can understand the organization, operation and management of the services provided. The third part is to let students gradually practice and master the methods of consultation, so as to make them realize that consultation is a peaceful and basic solution to conflicts and problems.

Specifically, the students in Grade One of junior high school focus on community experience and they serve children and adolescents. The students in Grade Two of junior high school receive environmental education, and they serve in parks and other public places. The students in Grade Three of junior high school serve the elderly, visiting them and providing them with all kinds of help that they need. The students in Grade One of senior high school serve the disabled, and they often go to the hospital and provide necessary assistance for the disabled. The students in Grade Two of senior high school receive citizenship education, cultivating students' community awareness, so that they can integrate into their communities in the future. As for the students in Grade Three of senior high school, their visions are expanded to the whole world. The course allows students to act as representatives of different countries and use consultation to resolve conflicts between countries, seeking practical solutions that do not violate their principles. After this kind of practice, students can experience the whole process of consultation in depth, master relevant principles and methods, and establish a sense of global citizenship ([Working Group of Macau Baha'i Community 1996](#)).

According to the teachers of the School of the Nations, the participation rate of students in their moral education courses is 100%, which is highly praised by the International Assembly of School Services. A student who participated in the course said, 'Participating in the moral education course not only makes me know myself better, but also has great significance for me and the society. I think moral education is a course that every good school should have'. Another student said, "My understanding of life has deepened. This is a life experience I have never had before. How happy it is to be able to help others!" Of course, in our interviews, a few students also expressed their unwillingness to attend such classes and that they did not get a strong sense of happiness. In summary, the School of Nations supports Baha'i values by promoting a moral education that is open to diverse perspectives, and thus departs from traditional Chinese educational practices through supporting the needs and beliefs of a wide range of students and teachers.

#### 4.4.3. Empowerment Project

In addition to the School of the Nations, Badi Foundation also carries out youth empowerment project in Macau, which aims to encourage young people to become active participants in the development of their local communities. Based on the experience of rural development around the world, Badi Foundation recognizes that young people aged 12 to 15 often show great enthusiasm for promoting the development of local communities. These "teenagers" are not adults, but they are no longer children. They often have in-depth discussions about the society around them and poverty, inequality and environmental pollution in many parts of the world. In view of this potential

of young people, the Badi Foundation has launched a youth empowerment project, which aims to guide young people of this special age group to form moral concepts, habits and attitudes that will help them better serve the local community. The main purpose of the youth empowerment project is to release the potential of the youth aged 12 to 15 to promote social and economic development of local communities, cultivate their perception and expression ability, and enhance their ability of social practice and social service.

The Badi Foundation places special emphasis on empowerment, seeking input, advice and collaboration from teachers, school leaders, and relevant government agencies, such as the Education Bureau. Some organizations also work with high school students or college students, asking them to guide and collaborate with young people on a voluntary basis. In the first year of the project, it cooperated with about 40 young people from two local schools in Macau. In the second year, the project was extended to five schools and a youth center with a total of about 160 teenagers. In the 2009–2010 academic year, the project continued to expand, involving nearly 200 teenagers and 20 college students ([Working Group of Badi Foundation 2010](#)). Since the launch of the project in 2007, more than 4800 people have participated in the project ([Badi Foundation n.d.](#)).

The curriculum of the youth empowerment project is taught in English, which is intended to improve students' English ability. These courses also help students understand the challenges faced by rural communities, and carry out consultation and cooperation with other people in the local community to promote the sustainable development of the community. Project participants can acquire skills that enable them to observe local communities, identify local needs, and design and implement services and activities that contribute to the social and economic development of local communities. In addition, the courses focus on improving the participants' understanding and application of ethical principles, such as being friendly to others, serving the community, being honest and frank, trustworthy, generous, and the importance of maintaining unity and harmony with family, friends and neighbors. The purpose of emphasizing the code of ethics is to encourage young people to serve others and invest time and energy in community service. In summary, the youth empowerment project further underscores how the Baha'i enact their faith through service and education.

## 5. Cultivation of Baha'i in the Community: The Construction of Citizenship

It can be seen that the above-mentioned community services focus on development, education and empowerment, but why does Baha'i place special emphasis on this type of social service? The ethnographic observations and interviews revealed that such social services are helpful in sustaining the cultivation of the Baha'i followers. One of the authors participated in a youth living camp held by the Baha'i Youth Department of Macau in Bosco, Kowloon on August 6 and 7, 2011. The theme of this activity was 'how to use free will to make positive choices in life, so as to influence the behavior of oneself and others'. The participants were mainly teenagers aged between 12 and 15, and they were junior high school students from different schools in Macau, both male and female. They made use of their summer holidays to carry out extracurricular activities and develop their interests. The campers devoted their enthusiasm to the activities. Under the guidance of the promoters, they showed their own ideas and personalities, and made their own thoughts active and improved.

In this youth living camp, there was a camp coordinator who is responsible for guiding the camp members to explore, study and organize activities. They were not teachers, but played the role of friends, including three foreign volunteers, as well as some teenagers themselves who also took part in the organization and planning work. They used the youth life stories inspired by Baha'i works to make teenagers understand that they were treasures themselves through group discussion, team cooperation, group service, drama performance, outdoor sports, artistic creation, talent performance and so on. By means of guidance and encouragement, they could explore their spiritual potential, so as to change individuals and society.

In the two-day-and-one-night living camp, the teenagers were led by the youth to cooperate in groups. The youth could closely guide and accompany the teenagers to complete various thematic

projects. In spite of the tight schedule, the campers established harmonious friendship in learning and fun. The whole camp was full of unity, interaction, cooperation, service and happy atmosphere. The young were very fond of taking activities together. Group projects and going up to the mountain to watch the sunrise were good opportunities for them to learn to choose and exercise their will. A participating teenager said, 'I am very happy. I met many friends, learned a lot of practical knowledge, and learned what the purpose of life is'. The activities were well-received by the young campers, and their parents also had the chance to learn and participate actively with interest.

In the past few years, the reach of the youth empowerment project has grown. More and more young people participate in community service activities, such as visiting the elderly, giving them goods and understanding their needs; visiting the nursing homes, singing for the elderly and chatting with them; tutoring children's lessons, helping them develop their moral competence; participating in the environmental actions of cleaning the local beach; organizing community activities in the local youth center; visiting the local animal shelter, feeding and bathing the stray animals, and so on.

A second year student of Macau International School said the following, 'We all must thank our teacher for helping us get more, which was far beyond our expectations. The teacher help us grow up and helped us understand what our inner world is. He created a relationship between us that we had never thought of before. He taught us a new word and a new quality, which is 'confirmation.' In addition to the dictionary explanation, the word deserves more respect. The word means to have faith in yourself and pursue the best choice you think, think for others, and commit to creating a better social environment for yourself and others. Everyone is very important to build our lives, because we are all one big family, no one will be abandoned and nothing can separate us'.

In the process of serving the society, by means of empowerment projects, the Baha'i followers appear to improve their personal ability in general, promoting them to serve the society. On the other hand, many followers choose to convert to Baha'i because of the particularity of the idea of charity service. This was described as a win-win situation. This empowerment-centered community service and the spread of Baha'i are complementary to each other. Mr. Jiang, chairman of Macau Baha'i General Assembly, concluded that the spread of this belief is 'low-key but mighty'. 'Low-key' refers to its low profile mode of spread. Unlike other traditional religions whose missionaries are sent to preach and attract believers, Baha'i has no missionaries, but every believer has the duty to spread their belief. Baha'i opposes dogmatism and formalism. Its membership and religious rites are simple, and there is no public or collective prayer. Baha'i spreads its doctrines mainly by various grass-roots service activities and education. "Mighty" refers to the large number of charity service activities carried out by Baha'i communities, from small scales to large scales, from grass-roots to NGOs, such as various social and economic projects, and various development agendas.

The goal of the Baha'i community in Macau is to establish 100 grass-roots service points in 2013. These activities have promoted the development of local society in different degrees and also expanded their living space and development opportunities. Actually, this kind, 'mighty' has greater foresight. These charity thoughts come from Baha'i doctrines of 'nobility', 'development' and 'education'. First, Baha'i believes that human beings are born with nobility. On the one hand, the nobility of human beings requires that everyone improves their personal ability as much as possible. On the other hand, it requires the equality of human beings. No matter their race, color, gender, class, social status and educational level, everyone has the essence of nobility and should be promoted and their should be promoted and developed. According to the will of Baha'u'llah, the Baha'is believe that everyone is noble, everyone should improve and develop themselves, but more importantly, they should help others develop while equipping themselves. How can one help others be noble? The Baha'is know that it is better to teach a man to fish than to give him fish. It is not a help just to donate money and things, but to serve. Serving others and the society is the best way to help others improve their abilities as well as ones own.

Secondly, Baha'i also attaches great importance to the concept of development, not only personal development, but also social and economic development. The Baha'i Scripture points out that all

human beings are created to promote evolving civilization (Baha'u'llah [1860] 2006). Abdu'l-Ba ([1916] 2009) said, 'The glory and excellence of an individual lies in that he should become the source of social welfare among all living beings in the world. When a man looks at himself and finds that by virtue of the grace of God, he has become a cause of peace, happiness and joy, and has brought benefits to his fellow citizens. Can one imagine a greater gift than this?... How glorious he would have been if he had come to perform his duty. How sad and shameful he would have been if he had turned a blind eye to the welfare of society and wasted his precious life in pursuit of personal benefits'.

In addition, Baha'i also pays attention to education. According to Baha'i classics, human nature has two aspects: material and spiritual. The higher nature of human spirit should show love, generosity, kindness and all the virtues of the human spirit. It is a basic aspect of the life goal and spiritual education to cultivate one's spiritual world. There are two main themes of Baha'i educational philosophy: one is to change personal character by cultivating spiritual potential; the other is to transform society by cultivating selfless service and practicing spiritual principles. Because one cannot develop one's talent and spiritual quality in isolation, it can only be achieved by serving others. Therefore, the spiritual education of Baha'i aims to cultivate such a recognition of identity: human's real identity is a spiritual existence, which has dual purposes in moral sense, not only to promote their own spiritual growth, but also to contribute to the development of society (Noguchi 2008). Therefore, Baha'i believes that only by vigorously developing education can we achieve economic and social development and human progress, and set foot on the road to God.

Therefore, this kind of 'low-key but mighty' charity way of Baha'i is one of the important reasons for the rapid development of Baha'i. Although Baha'i has always stressed that its social charity has nothing to do with preaching, in our research, we find that by means of a large number of social activities, more people understand Baha'i, which promotes the development of Baha'i.

## 6. Conclusions: The Practice of Humanitarian Spiritual Belief

In summary, this analysis presents the results of the exploratory ethnographic research on Baha'i in Macau. The results indicate that Baha'i, a relatively new religion, has spread world-wide and contributes distinctively modern characteristics, which challenge traditional approaches. Although Baha'i believes in God, its religious beliefs are more expressed by means of social ethics and social practice, particularly in community service and youth education. Its principles, propositions and doctrines are not only religious obligations, but also the secular social obligations for believers. Community service is the basic form of Baha'i religious life. The principle of 'work is worship, service is prayer' makes the believers serve the society by practical actions and personal practice, thus showing their religious beliefs and ideas to the world. As a result, religion and community are closely linked, and the emphasis on empowering service learning also makes Baha'i belief acceptable to the followers without full-time missionaries.

More generally, according to hermeneutics, spirituality is a process in which actors who participate in a new religion define their beliefs and worship practices repeatedly. People will seek a mysterious and meaningful spiritual belief outside the boundary of the secular and rational world, and eventually establish a mixed belief system of their own. The importance of religious authority, standardized way of belief, dogma and form is declining day by day, while the authority of personal things, internal feelings, individual experience and current "life" is on the rise (Heelas 2002). The reality is likely to be that there are fewer and fewer clearly visible forms of religious belief, but more and more invisible religions exist outside the formal religious institutions. This is "believing without becoming" in the real sense (Hunt 2005). As one example of this broader trend, the Baha'i in Macau illustrates how religious principles operate invisibly but powerfully through service to others.

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