

The Virtue of Difference in Tzu Chi Children's Literature

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The books in the “World Village” (Diqiu cun 地球村) series published by the Taiwanese Buddhist organization Tzu Chi Foundation feature children who are different somehow: blind, born without one hand, poor, responsible for caring for disabled parents. In each of the stories, the children are shown engaging in everyday activities but also as exceeding the circumstances of their birth. These stories relate to similar features in the organization's monthly magazine, which profile Tzu Chi members who have overcome life challenges. This paper will examine how this type of reporting has been adapted to a younger audience, and in particular what values these stories seek to impart to their readers. Although one might expect that profiles of differently-abled children are intended to elicit empathy for those less fortunate than the presumed reader, these books instead function to inspire readers to excel by narrating the success of exemplary children. The books thus seek to normalize difference by first drawing attention to it, and then showing that it does not matter. However, the books have a secondary message of community building: each of the books is set in a specific location or neighborhood within Taiwan, and postfaces highlight the special features of the locale. Taken alongside the main narrative, these celebrations of geographic diversity show that difference is valued when it can be incorporated in a broader sense of community.