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## **'Recycling the past' Tzu-chi waste recycling and the cultural politics of nostalgia in Taiwan**

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### **Citation**

Dung, Y. A. (2021, September 8). *'Recycling the past': Tzu-chi waste recycling and the cultural politics of nostalgia in Taiwan*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3209240>

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**Issue Date:** 2021-09-08

# Chapter One |

## Introduction

### 1. Tzu-chi Recycling in a Nutshell

‘What can your applauding hands do? They can sort rubbish’,<sup>1</sup> the Buddhist nun Shih Cheng-yen (釋證嚴; 1937-) told her audience on an August evening in 1990. Earlier, on her way to give a speech at one of the ‘Joyful Life’ seminars in Taichung, Cheng-yen—the founder and leader of the Buddhism-based lay organisation Tzu-chi—had been disturbed by the overwhelming amount of rubbish left behind in the open air market. In response to the audience’s enthusiastic applause for her speech, Cheng-yen called for a movement to obliterate rubbish.

That night, a 24-year-old woman in the audience took Cheng-yen’s words to heart and initiated a waste-paper collection scheme in her neighbourhood in Taichung. The news quickly spread among Tzu-chi’s devotees when the organisation received its first ‘environmental donation’ from the young woman a month after Cheng-yen’s speech. Gradually, the size and scale of the Tzu-chi recycling community grew as the organisation carried out Cheng-yen’s wish, and her followers worked towards achieving the goal of ‘Preserving the Pure Land in the Terrestrial World’ (預約人間淨土<sup>2</sup>),<sup>3</sup> a movement that worked to promote green

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix, quotation 1.1 for the Chinese text and pin-yin; the English translation is the author’s.

<sup>2</sup> yuyue renjian jingtu

<sup>3</sup> Tzu-chi Foundation 慈濟基金會, ‘Mo wang yuyue renjian jingtu’ 莫忘「預約人間淨土」, Tzu-chi official website, 22 September 2009,

consciousness and promulgate community recycling collection across the island through the organisational laity.

By 2018, almost three decades later, the Tzu-chi national recycling scheme consists of 279 recycling stations, 8,536 collection bases, 900 trucks, and a network of cadres and administrators across the nation with nearly 90,000 certified volunteer participants.<sup>4</sup> Tzu-chi recycling volunteers systematically collect miscellaneous recyclables ranging from plastic bags to household appliances from markets, shops, residential communities, and businesses. At the community recycling stations, volunteers and commissioners, mostly women and elderly people, sit on low stools and spend mornings and afternoons dismantling and classifying valuable discards: they remove small metal screws from old VCR tapes, cut blank white paper away from parts tainted with ink, use their feet to compress empty PET bottles, and wash the sorted plastic bags.

The above story of how Tzu-chi began to engage in recycling—the speech is referred to by the title ‘Using Applauding Hands to Protect the Environment’ (用鼓掌雙手做回收<sup>5</sup>)—was almost the standard opening of conversations I had with Tzu-chi commissioners to learn more about the organisation’s recycling story. The fabled narrative is also presented in many Tzu-chi productions: almanacs, television documentaries, organisational handouts, and the posters hanging on the walls of recycling stations. On the one hand, the standard prologue, which resembles a conversion narrative, includes organisation-wide tributes to the leadership of Cheng-yen, who initiated the activities that led to the current achievements of Tzu-chi recycling through her accidental but crucial observation and vision to advocate recycling before the state made it a priority in the early 1990s. On the other hand, the story addresses a specific characteristic of Tzu-chi recycling: that it is a semi-spontaneous, self-motivated, and community-based movement.

In the late 1990s, the volume of waste materials Tzu-chi recycled made up more than a quarter of the national recycling total. After the state implemented national

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<https://www.tzuchi.org.tw/%E5%85%A8%E7%90%83%E5%BF%97%E6%A5%AD/%E8%87%BA%E7%81%A3/item/8859-%E8%8E%AB%E5%BF%98%E3%80%8C%E9%A0%90%E7%B4%84%E4%BA%BA%E9%96%93%E6%B7%A8%E5%9C%9F%E3%80%8D> (accessed 17 September 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Tzu-chi Almanac 2018, ‘2018 nian ciji quanqiu huanbao zhigong renshu ji huanbao zhan/dian shu’

2018 年慈濟全球環保志工人數暨環保站 / 點數, 496.

<sup>5</sup> yong guzhang shuangshou zuo huishou

mandatory recycling programmes in the 2000s, the rest of society has caught up with recycling, and the total number of recyclable materials has increased dramatically nation-wide. Consequently, the percentage of recycling Tzu-chi volunteers perform has dropped significantly. Still, Tzu-chi recycled about 100 million kilos of waste material in 2015, some 3% of the national total.<sup>6</sup> Despite the declining share in overall national recycling, the number of Tzu-chi recycling volunteers has continuously grown, and the recycling programme remains one of the major public faces of the Buddhism-based organisation. In the 2000s, the Tzu-chi recycling programme not only spread across Taiwan but also around the world. According to the 2018 Tzu-chi almanac, outside Taiwan, there are a total of 252 recycling stations and 18,688 volunteers located across five continents, with particularly strong representation in South-East Asia and North America.<sup>78</sup> Taken together, a total of more than 100,000 volunteers participates in Tzu-chi recycling.

As part of its mission of environmental protection, the semi-spontaneously formed local community recycling bases are not independent of the headquarters of the Buddhism-based institute Tzu-chi, one of Taiwan's foremost non-governmental organisations. Instead, the task of recycling is closely coordinated with other organisational missions and institutions, in line with the vision of Tzu-chi's charismatic leader, Cheng-yen, and through the networks of voluntary commissioners and the management of the foundation. For example, Tzu-chi's listed company, Da-ai Technology (大愛感恩科技), manufactures a variety of 'green products', such as clothing, blankets, and stationery, made from recycled PET bottles that can be purchased from the Tzu-chi recycling stations. These products are sold in Tzu-chi's shops and used in Tzu-chi's national and international relief efforts and have earned a variety of international 'green design' awards. In addition to material supplies, the Tzu-chi recycling programme also provides financial support to other missionary projects. Today, Tzu-chi uses

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<sup>6</sup> Tzu-chi Foundation, *2016-2017 Sustainability Report* [in Chinese], 77.

<https://www.tzuchi.org.tw/CSR/doc/2016-2017CSR.pdf> (accessed 17 September 2019).

<sup>7</sup> The overseas development of the Tzu-chi recycling programme is largely the result of the expansion of Tzu-chi worldwide, which has two overlapping aspects: first, missions and missionaries, and specifically their global outreach programmes of international relief; and second, the overseas branches of Tzu-chi devotees.

<sup>8</sup> Tzu-chi Almanac 2018, '2018 nian ciji quanqiu huanbao zhigong renshu ji huanbao zhan/dian shu'

2018 年慈濟全球環保志工人數暨環保站 / 點數, 496.

the considerable income from the recycling scheme for the operation of Da-ai TV (大愛電視台), a Tzu-chi-owned, non-profit television station.

In 1998, when Tzu-chi launched Da-ai TV, a slogan was developed to epitomise the capacity and impact of the Tzu-chi recycling programme: 'Rubbish becomes gold; gold becomes love; love transforms into a clear stream; the clear stream encircles the world'.<sup>9</sup> The slogan soon became one of the most popular mottos of Tzu-chi recycling. On the one hand, the slogan is a description of the interlocking relations and remarkable achievements of the Tzu-chi conglomerate. Through organisational coordination and volunteers' recycling work, dirty and unwanted refuse is eventually turned into a 'clear stream': the international broadcasts of Da-ai TV, which is considered 'uncontaminated' by commercialisation because it relies not on advertising sales but on the financial resources the Tzu-chi recycling income provides, and the Da-ai blankets made from the discarded PET bottles Tzu-chi recycling volunteers collect, which are issued as part of Tzu-chi's international disaster-relief efforts.

On the other hand, the slogan is a typical institutional representation of the transcendent view through which Tzu-chi takes interprets its recycling practice, a visualisation of the value of transitioning fluidity across materials, labour, finances, information, and emotions. In other words, Tzu-chi's distinctive environmental discourse transforms the mundane act of waste-sorting into a practice of altruism. Therefore, the selfless endeavours of the recycling volunteers create the so-called 'love effects' that work against greenhouse effects; recycling stations become 'places of awakening', and the practice of recycling becomes a spiritual cultivation.

The thumbnail sketch above of Tzu-chi recycling suggests the multi-faceted nature of this religion-based, community-initiated, volunteer-operated recycling movement that has been active in Taiwan since the early 1990s. This overview, however, is rather an institutional account of how the system has developed from its grassroots beginnings to attain a global reach, the timescale that official Tzu-chi depictions claim. The significance and peculiarity of Tzu-chi recycling, nonetheless, lie deeper beneath the glamour of its large scale and kudos and are embedded in broader historical and social aspects of post-authoritarian Taiwan.

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<sup>9</sup> See Appendix, quotation 1.1 for the Chinese text and pin-yin; the English translation is the author's.

## 2. Research Inquiry and Objective

This dissertation investigates the relationship between waste recycling and social change, asking how the process of un/remaking materials remakes a society. As a point of departure, this dissertation shares a principal view found in the social science study of waste.<sup>10</sup> That is, waste is a constitutive element and reflects the terrain of modern society. Instead of complying with a prevailing notion of recycling as an environmental solution to the waste issue, or as converting and trading materials in a circular economy—views which are often found in previous scholarly works on Taiwan’s recycling—this dissertation maintains that recycling is about people, their relation to materials and environments, their networks of interaction and modes of thoughts. Accordingly, the overriding purpose of this study is to explore the sociological and cultural implications of waste recycling. The core research question is to ask how the waste practice of recycling transforms values in addition to those of discarded materials. The overarching argument of this dissertation will be presented in the next section.

The objective of the dissertation is thus to read the development of post-authoritarian Taiwan through the lens of waste recycling, as well as to understand waste recycling through Taiwan’s experience. Taking Tzu-chi recycling as a case study, this research elucidate how Tzu-chi recycling has corresponded and contributed to different social developments in Taiwan in the last several decades of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century. This dissertation analyses the Tzu-chi recycling phenomenon against the backdrop of wider historical resonances. The social changes examined are those of the national industrial transformation (Chap. 4), an aging society (Chap. 5), a localisation movement (Chap. 6), a religious movement (Chap. 7), and shifts in value orientation (Chap. 8).

While studying the relationship between Tzu-chi waste recycling and Taiwan’s social transition, the dissertation as a whole shows the ways in which Tzu-chi volunteers and associated members in Taiwan have managed, understood, represented, and practiced recycling. More specifically, each chapter presents Tzu-chi recycling through a particular focus, although not exclusively and sometimes dialectically, and asks related sub-questions: How is Tzu-chi recycling institutionally managed, and how does it relate to Taiwan’s recycling scheme as a

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<sup>10</sup> See Chapter Two for more comprehensive review.

whole (Chap. 3)? Who are the volunteers, why do they volunteer, what are the recycling works, and what knowledge is mobilised to deal with waste materials (Chap. 4 and 5)? How does the Tzu-chi recycling community network form and operate (Chap. 6)? How are waste and recycling represented, and what non-waste goals do such discursive endeavours serve (Chap. 7 and 8)?

For its empirical focus, this dissertation studies the case of Tzu-chi recycling in post-authoritarian, contemporary Taiwan. The case study of Tzu-chi is chosen with the conviction that it is one of the ‘rabbit hole’ an anthropologist and sociologist seeks: a passageway into the minutiae of a world of peculiar characteristics and unfamiliar semiotics. It is an empirical entry point into broad sociological structural exploration. Tzu-chi recycling is a grassroots movement of community waste disposal carried out by a Buddhist organisation which has almost fully relied on voluntary workforces. The phenomenon flourished and developed throughout the pivotal periods of Taiwan’s rapid political, economic, and cultural transformation. The peculiarity of Tzu-chi recycling allows researchers to understand the dynamics between waste and society beyond the commonly recognised environmental movements instigated and led by environmental bureaucratic organisations and academic environmentalists, beyond the institutional responses to environmental disputes from the perspectives of policy analysis and conflict resolution. It further provides international scholarship with insights into waste movements in the context of East Asian developmental states, a region that once occupied the role of global production for industrial consumer goods, particularly in the second half of the twentieth century. Tzu-chi recycling represents a case of a community-based movement, and it is by no means a flash in the pan nor a short-term project. It is a phenomenon which has evolved over the last three decades. Moreover, Tzu-chi recycling is not bound to a specific, local region of Taiwan; rather, it is a nation-wide phenomenon, seen both in urban and countryside areas. Further, the institutional discourse and operational system of Tzu-chi recycling travels internationally through the organisation’s global media reach and philanthropic missions. While recognising its international aspect, I should clarify that this dissertation nevertheless focuses on Tzu-chi recycling which has taken place *in* Taiwan. This decision is mainly based on the research aim, which is to approach the complexities and dense local references with ideas about waste recycling that have taken on concrete meanings. This premise assumes that every ‘elsewhere’ development of Tzu-chi community recycling has its own local context. For this reason, I have avoided presenting case studies of Tzu-chi recycling in a variety of



global places and preferred an approach that carefully presents a single case as an example of broader dilemmas and the complexity of contemporary life in the context of Taiwan.

### **3. Argument in Brief**

This dissertation proposes that Tzu-chi recycling system itself represents a kind of societal mechanism of recycling which not only recycles objects but also non-object forms of discard. As the dissertation will demonstrate, what to be found in Tzu-chi recycling, including people, ideas, and actions, are those of which once lost their place and value in the tides of Taiwan's progressive social change over the last century; and those which represent 'the past' of Taiwanese society are now mobilized and reused with new purposes for further development. It is the assembly of those non-material forms of remain and refuse making Tzu-chi's waste material recycling possible. Further, this research argues that the Tzu-chi recycling phenomenon reflects Taiwanese society's search for certainty and belonging from the past in the face of a precarious and challenging future.

In brief, the main argument of this dissertation is that Tzu-chi recycling is a cultural movement made possible through the enactment of nostalgia. In the cultural politics of nostalgia, the past is a resource for sentimental longing, utopian imagining, as well as coping mechanisms in the face of environmental, social, and cultural consequences caused by drastic social and life changes. Individuals and groups of people are mobilised to take action because of this relationship with their past. While Chapter Two reviews numerous aspects scholars have identified in their conceptualisations of nostalgia, and further articulates a conceptual connection between recycling and nostalgia, in this dissertation, nostalgia, as a shorthand, is referred to as 'recycling the past'. That theme is the source of the dissertation's title because it runs like a thread through the chapters, tying them together as an analytic whole. This dissertation argues that in Tzu-chi, the discarded objects, labour, and skills of recycling, the social network of waste work, and related environmental narratives are the emblem of the participants' nostalgic past and the tool to build an idealised future. The enactment of nostalgia takes place in Tzu-chi recycling, as the dissertation reveals, at three levels: individual, communal, and institutional. Different chapters are each in some way devoted to exploring these different aspects and interpretations of nostalgia, which are associated with, and give rise to, different ways of relating oneself to the past and the present and of interpreting recycling practices. The

objective with respect to this theme is not only to demonstrate how such relations may differ from one another, but also how nostalgic sentiments have been central to shaping Tzu-chi recycling, and more broadly, Taiwanese society.

The remainder of this introduction begins with a brief overview of contemporary Taiwan in the 20th century, during its authoritarian and entering the post-authoritarian periods; this starting point is necessary, as it serves a backdrop to the whole dissertation. In the next section, it outlines the structure of the dissertation and the organisation of its chapters. The third section gives an overview on methods and presents the research design, field methods, and related reflections.

#### **4. A Glance at Taiwan in the Second Half of the 20th Century**

In his article published in 2000, Robert Weller, an American anthropologist who studied Taiwan and particularly its religious landscape starting in the 1970s, described it as a society ‘living at the edge’ and ‘float[ing] in limbo’. Consisting of a main island and several satellite islands and two coastal regions, Taiwan indeed lies at the edge of Asia, sitting at the intersection of China, Japan, and Southeast Asia, a location which has shaped its political history. By the time Weller wrote these descriptions at the end of the second millennium of the Gregorian calendar, Taiwan had just experienced a century of intensive cataclysms; a series of political and economic systems had occurred one after the other, and Taiwanese society was constantly caught in the status of interim. After the second World War, Japanese authorities left Taiwan in 1945, ending its 50-year colonisation that began in the aftermath of the Sino-Japanese War, when China ceded Taiwan to Japan. Several years later, Taiwan became a site of contest in the Cold War, when the Nationalist government of China, Kuomintang (國民黨; hereafter, KMT), lost to the Communists and fled to Taiwan in 1949. Taiwan then entered another phase of provisionality under the rule of the émigré regime of KMT. For its anti-communist military mission, Taiwan was turned into a bastion to reclaim KMT’s lost mainland, and Taipei was proclaimed as the temporary capital of China. A temporary ‘state of emergency’ was declared, essentially the imposition of martial law. A repressive political-economic dominance characterised post-war Taiwan. While the languages used in the past, such as Taiwanese Hokkien and Japanese, were forbidden in the public, and all media were tightly controlled, policies such as land reform were launched in the 1950s so that the landlord class was forced to appropriate and redistribute land ownership (Wong 2016). Patterns of

landholding reversed, and the previous power structure was reconfigured. The past was something to be discarded.

In the 1960s and 1970s, when the idea of reclaiming the mainland became an increasingly distant dream, the KMT regime underwent a gradual transition from militarism to industrial developmentalism (Ho 2010). Taiwan began to (re)insert itself into the global market by taking up the role of manufacturing and exporting. This time, it was not as a global supplier of agricultural products such as sugar, tea, and rice, as it had been during the 19th century and under Japanese rule. Instead, it produced light industrial commodities for the domestic market. The strategy was to rely on cheap and intensive labour forces and to have the market decide which industries would lead the capitalist advance and that the state would choose to invest in and develop. The earlier ‘winners’ included the classic representative of the cheap labour frontier, the textile industry and rubber and leather factories; there were also the ‘newcomers’ such as the injected-molded plastic of the petrochemical industry, which made nondurable products, e.g., toys and garments, as well as electronic components and assembly manufacturing (Lim 2014). The political authority relied on indirect scale incentives to grow its industrial base, in contrast to those cases where the state provided direct subsidies and investment to cultivate large conglomerates, such as those in South Korea and Japan; this strategy nonetheless ensured that Taiwan’s industrial landscape consisted of small and medium-sized enterprises which were agile, constantly on the move according to market signals, and constantly in the status of *pro tempore*, for the time being. In the 1970s and 1980s, the national industry continued to change. The capital-intensive and high-tech industries, such as steel, electronic engineering, and semiconductors, for example, took off when the light manufacturing industry gradually shifted its operations offshore, first to Southeast Asia and later to China. The post-war Taiwan heretofore had experienced industrial production growth and capital and technology accumulation within few decades. Education popularised, urban areas became populated, and income was distributed relatively fairly. These experiences later made the island society a textbook example of the first generation of New Industrial Countries and a model of a post-war developmental state, next to similar states such as Singapore and South Korea (Ho 2008; Wong 2016).

Although its economy thrived and society developed, both Taiwan’s regime and people had been at the edge of political power. In the late 1970s, the KMT political regime lost its diplomatic recognition, epitomised by the removal of its seat in the United Nations, when the United States normalised relations with Communist

China, the People's Republic of China. As Weller has noted, 'Taiwan was fully in limbo from that point on' (2000, 217). Meanwhile, opposition to state plans and narratives was still not allowed; the president was still elected by the National Assembly chosen in 1947, and political decisions were made by the ruling elite of the KMT regime. With exceptional global economic experience, yet without a place in a world of nation-states, and with financial, social, and educational capital but no right to having a political say, at the same time, Taiwanese society faced overwhelming issues that resulted from its rapid industrial and urbanised development, including environmental degradation, social discrimination, class exploitation, and rural impoverishment. These built on political energies that erupted around the 1980s, a transitional period that scholars often identify as a watershed in Taiwan's democratisation (e.g., Ho 2010; Jacob 2016; Passi 2018). Students, farmers, fishermen, labourers, environmental activists, aboriginals, and feminists marched in the streets for reform and change. In 1986, the first oppositional political party was formed, followed by the lifting of martial law the next year. In the National Affair conference in 1990, the same year Tzu-chi recycling began, one agreement was that the national policy should prioritise the security and well-being of Taiwan's residents over those of mainland China, revealing the mind-set of the ruling party over the last four decades (Jacob 2016). The first popular election of the president was held in 1996 against the background of Chinese military threats; in 2000, when Weller published his article, the KMT regime ended its half-century of rule when the candidate of the oppositional political party, the Democratic Progress Party (DPP), won the presidential election, marking Taiwan's first democratic transition of political power. Within the next two decades, the ruling political party constantly changed between the KMT and DPP, indicating a great political division in this island society.

Accompanying the vigorous democratisation process was the burgeoning growth of civic groups and organisations (Hsiao and Kuan 2016), on the one hand, and an inward-turning indigenisation of cultural politics on the other. When the political view shifted from being China-oriented to Taiwan-centred, identity in Taiwan was in flux. For the first time in a century, local people discussed what it meant to be Taiwanese, what Taiwan represented, and what defined it. The Hometown Literature Movement took off in the 1970s. Writers and poets wrote about the beauty of Taiwan's rural life, placing farmers at the heart of agricultural development as the symbol of a newly established Taiwanese identity, in contrast to the KMT-led industrialisation (Bain 1993). Around the 1980s and 1990s, a

cultural/national identity was established by practicing ‘a specifically Taiwanese way of life’; to highlight this, Shelly Rigger writes, it was a practice ‘to speak Hokkien without shame, to worship Mazu without apology’ (2011, 33). Further, Simona Grano (2015, 41) has argued that, in the indigenisation of cultural politics at the time, the idea of ‘the need to protect the native cultural and physical richness of their country and its natural surroundings’ was central to the identity of majority of Taiwan’s environmental groups and the movement’s development. Furthermore, a similar inward-turning indigenisation was observed in scholarly Taiwanese studies (e.g., Murry and Hong 1994; Cheng and Marble 2004; Passi 2018). The scholarship gradually shifted from its earlier tendency of ‘looking through Taiwan to see China’ to a ‘discussion around a common geographical space, the peoples who inhabit it, and the political struggles that have made it into a place of contested statehood, history, and memory’ (Simon 2018, 12).

Because of all these fast-paced political and economic changes, the international conundrums, the convergence of fragmented identities, and the development of new systems, as vigorous and remarkable as those achievements may be, Taiwan was not a place to relax and feel certainty. With the constant spectre of political turmoil or economic change and barriers to participating in foreign affairs, the atmosphere was filled with possibilities that fostered a mode of precariousness in the 1980s and 1990s. For example, in a kind of the ‘gambler’s economy’, capital flooded into investments, typically in the stock and real estate market, and entrepreneurs rushed into opportunities for short-term profits (Weller 2011b).

Taiwan’s religious life seemed to thrive on this modern tension, secular uncertainty, and risks (Chi 2010). The major growth in different versions of indigenous religion experienced several decades of creative expansion, including a drastic boom in the 1980s to 2000s, and challenged the Western theory of secularisation, which assumes a definite decline in religiosity when a society modernises (cf. Madsen 2007; Chu 2008; Kuo 2012). Varying greatly in religious practices, organisational forms, and the moralities they claim, some religions work to avoid adversity and alteration fate encountering, and others address the individual’s spiritual cultivation to withstand a turbulent social milieu. Tzu-chi represents one example of the latter group. The expansion of religion also became part of Taiwan’s transforming force, which is seen, for instance, in its intercession in the Taiwanese environmental movement.

During the late 1980s and 1990s, there was a sudden surge of environmental movements in Taiwan, including those related to anti-pollution, nature, and anti-

nuclear demands. For instance, Weller and Hsiao (1998) have noted that, in 1991 alone, there were 278 cases of environmental protest. Given that local temples were historically the nodes of local economic and political networks and centres of local identity in Taiwan (Chi 2018), it is not surprising that religion played a crucial role in environmental movements, particularly those instigated and led by local organisers. Mobilising their symbolic resources and social ties, local temples organised, for example, opposition to a community garbage dump in Kaohsiung County and the polluting facilities of the fifth naphtha cracker plant (Weller 2006; Lu 2016). In those incidents, deity parades and ghost festivals were part of the action repertoire of local environmental mobilisation. Alongside social resources and financial funds, religions also offer environmental movements powerful moral sanctions in local terms (Grano 2015; Lu 2016). In addition to events that local organisers led, the 'knowledge class' also played a key role in Taiwan's environmental movements. The knowledge class includes scientific experts, who often held a Western degree of higher education and who later tended to be environmental bureaucrats in governmental institutes and/or the academic environmentalists in (inter)national organisations. In contrast to local environmental movements, in which the line between culture and environment dissolves 'in the leitmotif of local identity and politics, community well-being, religious beliefs, kinship, and personal networks' (Weller and Hsiao 1998, 106), the attitudes of the experts resonate closely with Western green thinking, which sees conflicts between economic growth and natural environmental protection and approaches the issue by addressing the scientific control of nature.

So far I sketch Taiwan in the second half of the 20th century, outlining its political, economic, religious, and environment-related landscapes during the compressed transitions from an authoritarian party-state to indigenous civil society. The transition offers a social background for the emergence and development of Tzu-chi recycling. It is a period of intertwined opportunities and uncertainties. Whether described as on the edge or in limbo, the island society was in an ongoing, precarious process of breaking down and building up its political, economic, and social and cultural systems. From a linear perspective of progress with a forward-looking view, this counts a development towards the future. However, progress produces rejects. By reversing the perspective, we see the discards, what is left behind during such vigorous development. One recalls Walter Benjamin's idea of a 'modest methodological proposal for the cultural historical dialect' in which a system produces itself by separating the 'lively' and 'positive' part of the epoch from that which it casts off as 'abortive, retrograde, and obsolescent' (1999,

459). Nevertheless, both sides represent the system. Questions then emerge: What are the representations of the remains and refuse of Taiwan's drastic contemporary development, and what happens to those discards? As precariousness is a property of an interim status, what are the concrete, material features of Taiwan's contemporary uncertainties? By examining its refuse and discards, this study aims to contribute to the understanding of contemporary Taiwan and its modernity.

## 5. Dissertation Structure and Chapter-by-chapter Overview

This dissertation analyses four aspects of Tzu-chi recycling: management, people, community, and discourse. Accordingly, in six substantive chapters, each (sometimes as part of a pair with another) corresponds to one of these aspects and is associated with a specific social development of contemporary Taiwan. This has made it possible to order the chapters from micro to macro, and from individual to communal to institutional. The remainder of the dissertation begins with Chapter Two, *Theoretical Points of Departure: Waste and Nostalgia*, which discusses scholarly literature concerning waste and recycling on the one hand and nostalgia on the other; it explains how each of these two bodies of literature has contributed to the formulation of this dissertation's object of study, research question, and analytic approaches. The main body starts with Chapter Three, *Recycling Scheme: Taiwan and Tzu-chi*, by locating the Tzu-chi recycling programme in Taiwan's national recycling system to illustrate its embeddedness and particularity. Chapter Four, *Disposable and Recyclable Labour*, and Chapter Five, *The Volunteers and their Volunteering*, both concern Tzu-chi volunteers and their waste labour 'inside' the Tzu-chi recycling stations. However, each provides a different yet complementary perspective, one from an economic structural point of view and the other from that of personal lived and living experience. Chapter Six, *(Re)Making the Communities and Locality*, moves the focus 'outside' the recycling stations to look at the development and operations of the Tzu-chi recycling community and local networks of waste collection. Finally, Chapter Seven, *Recycling and Religion: A Humanistic Buddhist Approach*, and Chapter Eight, *The Cultural Project of Recycling: Traditional Order and Nostalgic Environmentalism*, both analyse Tzu-chi's environment-related discourse to examine the representation of waste and recycling from the organisation's perspective. Chapter Seven explores its relation to the organisation's religious identity, while Chapter Eight focuses on the organisation's cultural/temporal belongingness.

From a more detail-oriented perspective, Chapter Three explains the logistical and management scheme of the Tzu-chi recycling programme. The chapter provides institutional background information that is essential for understanding the following chapters. A brief overview of Taiwan's contemporary recycling movement is first illustrated. After, the chapter presents the industrial logistics networks with a comparative sketch of three national recycling conduits: local government, private business, and Tzu-chi. The final part of this chapter investigates five components of the Tzu-chi recycling programme: volunteer types, recycling sites, material classifications, the administrative task force, and institutional partners.

Chapters Four and Five concern the characteristics of recycling labour and the ways volunteers make sense of their recycling engagements with Tzu-chi. Chapter Four begins by highlighting how the existing wisdom of Tzu-chi recycling is dominated by an assumption that emphasises the ideological impetus and a focus on the commissioned volunteers. While weaving together descriptions of recycling works and (non-commissioned) volunteers' stories, Chapter Four elucidates how people's voluntary participation in Tzu-chi recycling is embedded in Taiwan's drastic industrial transformations in the second half of twentieth century. It argues that who and what was considered useful or useless throughout the economic development process are intertwined, and that Tzu-chi recycling is a site which not only recycles waste materials but also discarded labour and skills.

Chapter Five explores the connection between recycling volunteering and waste labour from the perspective of volunteers. It starts with an ethnographic account of one particular day in a Tzu-chi recycling station to ground the imagination in daily events. A discussion follows on the Tzu-chi public crisis in 2014 to address the indispensability of a dialectical view. Next, the chapter focuses on the interactions the volunteers have with waste objects and with one and another. This highlights the aspects of somatic knowhow, tacit knowledge, and the communal working environment in Tzu-chi recycling settings. As remains from the past, these aspects provide a sense of a familiar self with new meanings in an aged society.

Chapter Six turns the attention to the Tzu-chi recycling community and its relation to Taiwan's national community-based movement in the 1990s and 2000s. The main purpose of this chapter is to enhance our understanding of recycling in terms of its cultural meaning, social mechanisms, economic power, and political opportunity in a communal setting. It starts with the background



contexts of Tzu-chi and Taiwan's localisation movements and presents the case study of Jiaoxi Linmei community recycling to illustrate the permeating, bridging role recycling played in both movements. By examining the cultural politics of the movements, this chapter centres a nostalgic longing for locality and further demonstrates that the development of Tzu-chi recycling communities is a realisation of this yearning. It explains the traditional mechanism of social interaction which underlines and fosters Tzu-chi recycling collection. The chapter ends with a twist by looking at the recent development of the Jiaoxi Linmei case. It illustrates how local politics challenge the idealist imagination of locality and how local politics is complicated by the lucrative profits and political opportunities of recycling.

Chapters Seven and Eight both study the ways in which narratives of religion, traditional value, and environmentalism operate in Tzu-chi recycling. Chapter Seven focuses on religion and analyses the institutional narratives, which are inflected by Buddhism. This chapter begins with a discussion of a body of literature which concerns religion and ecology generally, and Buddhist environmentalism specifically, to situate the following analysis in a scholarly inquiry into the role of environmentalism in religion. The chapter then closely reads Tzu-chi narratives to illustrate that the organisation uses Buddhist concepts to articulate its environmental concerns and explain recycling. The chapter further examines Tzu-chi recycling against the backdrop of, first, the tenets and development of the humanistic Buddhism to which Tzu-chi belongs, and second, the development and structure of the Tzu-chi organisation. The chapter thus suggests that recycling is one of many intermediaries for the organisation to achieve its religious goal of secularising Buddhism and revitalising Buddhism's social status in Taiwan.

Chapter Eight continues to read Tzu-chi's environmental narrative yet emphasises the narrative tinged with other classical Chinese philosophical domains, namely Confucianism and Daoism. This chapter then sketches a cultural background of Taiwan's shifts in value orientation to integrate the understandings of Tzu-chi recycling from the preceding chapters. The chapter first introduces the cultural mission of Tzu-chi against the organisation's developmental trajectory and explains its relation to recycling. It then further analyses the narratives according to the proposed conceptual scheme of 'ordered purity' to describe the representations of purity in Tzu-chi's systems of mind, interpersonal relations, and physical organisms (the planet and human body). Highlighting how the narratives manifests a traditional anthropocosmic

worldview, the chapter ends with the proposition that Tzu-chi recycling is a localised product of the organisation's nostalgia, and that its environmental discourse is a result of a culture of recycling and remaking.

The concluding chapter brings this dissertation to a close and summarises the key findings and arguments in three parts: Taiwan and Tzu-chi recycling, how Tzu-chi recycling works, and recycling the past and the cultural politics of nostalgia.

## **6. Research Methods**

This final section of the introduction chapter gives an overview of how this research project was conducted. It addresses several facets of the doctoral project's research methods, including research design, fieldwork and field methods, and reflections on the researcher's positionality. It aims to discuss these in a reflexive manner.

### **6.1 Research Design and Choosing the Case Study**

Research design is largely a process of choosing and adapting methods that are suitable to answer the questions posed. Given that the research questions posed in this doctoral project concern the sociological and cultural implications of waste recycling, asking how the waste practice of recycling transforms values in addition to those of discarded materials, the appropriate methodological choice was to study 'around' the waste recycling and look into the lifeworlds which revolve around and were created by it. I found myself drawn to the humanistic model of social research, which serves as the methodological and ethnographic basis. That is, one of the best ways to study this world is to become closer to it and participate in it directly to enable an exploration of the meanings of the 'field'—a naturally recurring setting—and its behaviour and activities from within (Brewer 2000). This methodological approach reflects the research project's roots in the interdisciplinary field of 'area studies', which draws on a 'mediated research technique or methodology' and depends on 'local insights as a means to modify general, standardised disciplinary research methods' in order to formulate a non-exclusive approach towards the research subject (Bestor et al. 2003, 3).

Overall, this project mainly adopts case-based qualitative methods, with some quantitative data serving as auxiliary and supportive statistical evidence if necessary. Generally speaking, case studies are useful for identifying causal mechanisms, exploring causal complexity, enhancing internal validity, and

generating new understandings (Gerring 2007, 37-63), and they tend to be more appropriate to answering the questions posed in this research. Moreover, case studies enjoy a natural advantage in research with an exploratory feature. In investigating Taiwan's waste recycling, far less scholarly attention has been paid to the non-governmental and non-private-business actors, or to the sociological significance of waste in Taiwan's societal transitioning. This situation leaves many key issues, basic topics, empirical developments, and historical meanings unexplored. With many general questions unaddressed, there is more urgency to examine the scheme, meaning, operation, and relations of Taiwanese waste recycling through case studies rather than focusing only on a specific domain, namely policy, economy, labour, or discourse.

Nevertheless, research design is an on-going process of adaptation and modification that accompanies the research process. The choice of Tzu-chi recycling, as well as the choice of a case-based method to understand the relation between waste and Taiwan, only came in the later stages of the research project. The changing research design and focus was a considered decision made based on what happened in the field, and it reflects the nature of field research. That is, as a mode of inquiry, field research entails more than simply collecting data. Instead, it is an 'informed interaction between data generation and data analysis', which involves a range of on-the-ground practices connected to research design, data selection, information mapping, strategy adaptation, and theory development (Kapiszewski, MacLean and Read 2015, 9-10). In the earlier stage of the project, when I was based in the Netherlands, I primarily relied on online archival research to become acquainted with the topic of waste and recycling in Taiwan; public documents such as government regulations and school policies were the most accessible materials on the Internet. From there, I formulated the initial research design before going into the field to analyse the social-political structure of Taiwan's waste recycling and to map out key stakeholders and systems.

As the preliminary fieldwork unfolded between 2014 and 2015, I discovered something unknown to me: community recycling and Tzu-chi. When I talked to people about my research, Tzu-chi often cropped up in conversations, mentioned by people of different genders and social or economic backgrounds, within or outside of the field of waste and recycling. By then, I decided that the most useful course of action was to understand the field as it presented itself and thus included Tzu-chi as one of stakeholders representing community recycling. Nevertheless, as the research continued, I learned how much the organisation had

spread into all corners of the recycling world, confirming its centrality. This turning point led to the decision to pursue this centrality. At the beginning of the second round of my fieldwork in 2016, I sought a case of (non-Tzu-chi) community recycling to continue my initial research plan. However, the community I found, Jiaoxi Linmei, ultimately had a developmental background in Tzu-chi recycling (see Chapter Six). From then on, Tzu-chi became the core of the project.

When shifting the main focus, I made a methodological choice to study ‘up’ into the Tzu-chi recycling world. Instead of studying Tzu-chi institutional publications and interviewing the organisational representatives before (re)entering the field, I decided to first continue my participant observation approach to focus on recycling practice in everyday settings. This decision was first made considering the growing argument in the social sciences that static interviews are insufficient, and that a methodological approach which locates conversations within on-going, situated actions is to be encouraged to focus on ‘doing’ as well as ‘saying’ (Schatzki 1996; Savage and Burrows 2007; Evans 2011b). Second, when reading the existing literature about Tzu-chi, it occurred to me that the studies on Tzu-chi are mostly informed either by observations made at an institutional level or by the accounts of commissioners. I sought to explore the perspectives of the community volunteers first before ‘moving up’.

## 6.2 Fieldwork and Field Methods

The empirical materials that inform the analysis in this dissertation are drawn from a broad ethnographic study that I undertook between 2014 and 2018. The fieldwork was divided into three parts. The initial fieldwork ran from November 2014 to June 2015, when I undertook preliminary research, mainly in people’s homes and at two schools in Taipei. At the same time, I visited people and organisations in Taiwan, both governmental and non-governmental, that were relevant to the issues of waste recycling. Additionally, I conducted interviews with a variety of local private collectors and participated in their works (i.e., collecting and sorting rubbish, traveling to recycling yards and shops to sell the materials). The second round of fieldwork was mainly conducted between April and July 2016, when substantive investigation into Tzu-chi recycling took place. In this period, I volunteered on a regular basis at a Tzu-chi recycling station in Taipei; I visited people and sites and participated in the activities of Tzu-chi recycling at different locales across Taiwan and one in Hong Kong. Additionally, I conducted

an ethnographic study at a community association with a recycling programme in Yilan County. The last round of fieldwork was in January 2018, when a limited number of complementary interviews and visits were performed.

During my fieldwork, I introduced myself as a PhD student in the Netherlands and described my research, which studied Taiwan's recycling movement from a cultural and social perspective to those with whom I made contact. The self-introduction was supplemented with a document summarising the research summary, including the statements on the principle of anonymising sources and providing contact information. Consequently, all the respondents in this dissertation are referred to by pseudonym the researcher assigned, or simply by their roles in relation to Tzu-chi. The majority of communication in the field was done in Mandarin Chinese, the official language of Taiwan; a certain portion, though, particularly with Tzu-chi volunteers, was in Taiwanese Hokkien, a language spoken natively by about 70% of the Taiwanese population.

Throughout the fieldwork, I used the combined field research 'tools' of participating, observing, conversing, and the close reading of documentary sources as my ethnographic methods. The data-collection process was performed mainly through participant observation at a number of Tzu-chi recycling sites and events in Taiwan. In addition, my toolbox included interviews, accessing archives and digital data, searching for online resources and journalistic reports, and gathering pre-existing sources and materials. These different data-collection techniques were profitable when combined with each other in terms of cross-checking evidence, enhancing data quality, and enabling me to understand and analyse the information. The precise procedure for applying these methods was not fixed at the start of the research process; rather, it evolved through a process of negotiation with the practical situations encountered in the field. For example, the decision to study Tzu-chi's archival collection was made after I had conducted participant observation at a Tzu-chi station and held an interview with a commissioned volunteer. At the time, I found it difficult to understand the recurring yet specific Buddhist interpretation of environmental degradation the recycling volunteers mentioned, and it became clear that it was necessary to understand the institutional dimension of Tzu-chi's Buddhist environmental view. The ethnographic fieldwork follows a 'snowballing method'. With each informant I encountered, I tried to let him or her introduce me to more potential respondents, including co-workers, friends, and acquaintances; that is, each respondent could also be a gatekeeper or liaison in my recruitment chain. The

chain ended when no more interviewees could be introduced, or I ended it when there was little prospect of finding new information.

In Table 1.1, I list the major events of my participant observation of Tzu-chi recycling. Methodologically speaking, participant observation often represents a foundational method, ‘a starting point’, according to Schensul and LeCompte (2013, 83), for ethnographic research. My adoption of participant observation was confined to the basic idea Musante has suggested, namely, that ‘participant observation is a method in which a researcher takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning both the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and cultures’ (2015, 251). To define an ideal and suitable participant observation, I kept Evans’s reminder in mind: ‘the success of participant observation [...] depends upon a profound level of introspection on the part of the researcher with respect to his or her relationship to what is to be (and is being) researched’ (1988, 197). The participant observations were conducted in a total of three rounds of fieldwork in Taiwan. To keep records of my observation, in addition to on-site written notes, I relied on a technique to record myself, narrating my observations and informants’ responses to a digital recorder during or immediately after participation for ‘freshness’. The written notes and recorded narratives were used for subsequent review and transcription.

Table 1.1 The Major events of the author’s participant observation on Tzu-chi recycling

No.	Date	Place	Event
1	8-Nov-14	Kaohsiung	participated in an environmental education event at a Tzu-chi district environmental station, the event including a lecture on waste pollution and classification, a group exercise on waste sorting and a tour of the station
2	8-Apr-15	Taipei	visited a community recycling station in Xinyi district, Taipei
3	8-Apr-15	Taipei	participated in recycling at a Tzu-chi's mobile recycling site at a communal park in Xinyi district, Taipei

(continued)

No.	Date	Place	Event
4	13-Mar-16	Rotterdam	attended in a Chinese New Year celebration event held by Tzu-chi branch in the Netherlands
5	15-Apr-16	Taipei	began my volunteering in the Ba-de district environmental station in Zhongshan district in Taipei
6	16-Apr-16	Taipei	visited an Earth Day festival event where Tzu-chi had a booth advocating the organization's environmental education
7	17-Apr-16	Taipei	attended an environmental education event held at a congregational centre on the issues of environmental degradation, waste classification and making soap from food waste
8	28-Apr-16	Yilan	visited the Linmei community association in Jiaoxi township
9	16-May-16	Yilan	visited a Tzu-chi community recycling station in Jiaoxi township
10	16-May-16	Yilan	visited a Tzu-chi environmental park in Zhongwei township
11	22-May-16	Yilan	visited the Linmei community association, participated in its recycling activity
12	23-May-16	Hualien	visited Tzu-chi headquarter and the exhibition of Tzu-chi's organizational missions, including the recycling programme
13	24-May-16	Hualien	visited a Tzu-chi environmental park in Hualien City
14	26-May-16	Taipei	visited the main office and the research and development department of the Da-ai company
15	29-May-16	New Taipei City	attended the annual event of the Tzu-chi recycling programme, 'the Northern region environmental volunteer improvement day'
16	29-May-16	New Taipei City	visited a Tzu-chi district recycling in Sangchong District, New Taipei City
17	5-Jun-16	Yilan	visited the Linmei community association and its recycling site

(continued)

No.	Date	Place	Event
18	5-Jun-16	Yilan	visited a Tzu-chi recycling community recycling station in Jiaoxo township
19	21-Jun-16	Hong Kong	attended a presentation of Tzu-chi environmental education given by the representative of Tzu-chi recycling in Hong Kong
20	21-Jun-16	Hong Kong	visited Tzu-chi recycling station in Kowloon Refuse Transfer Centre
21	9-Jul-16	Taipei	attended the bi-monthly meeting of the environmental admin of Tzu-chi's Taipei First Unity
22	15-Jul-16	Taipei	ended my volunteering at the Tzu-chi Ba-de recycling station
23	14-Jan-18	Taipei	visited the Tzu-chi Ba-de recycling station
24	16-Jan-18	Taipei	visited a Tzu-chi environmental park in Neihu district, Taipei
25	22-Jan-18	Hualien	visited a Tzu-chi environmental park in Hualien City

While the majority of the data collected in the first fieldwork session does not represent the central analytic focus of this dissertation, it nonetheless provided me with foundational information about the official recycling regulations, industrial logistical scheme (see Chapter Three), private business operations, and daily practices and narratives of recycling in household and school settings. Having noted the role of Tzu-chi in the recycling system, in the first round of fieldwork, I then undertook a day of observation at a Tzu-chi district environmental station in Kaohsiung, participating in one of its community environmental education events. The event was introduced by one of my early respondents, who was a staff member at a national environmental NGO and who's relative was a Tzu-chi commissioner. In addition to the event participation, I visited two other Tzu-chi recycling sites in Taipei at this preliminary stage. One was a mobile recycling site at a community park, and the other was a community environmental station. A Tzu-chi commissioner, who was a neighbour of my



acquaintance, introduced and accompanied me on the visit to the community environmental station.

During my second period of fieldwork, between April and August 2016, more extensive investigation was conducted. This primarily included my regular volunteering in a Tzu-chi recycling site in Taipei, the Ba-de District Environmental Station, and my visits to the Linmei community recycling in Yilan County. Additionally, I attended several gatherings and environmental activities held by Tzu-chi congregations at different locations.

First, during my approximately three-month participant observation at the Ba-de recycling station in Zhongshan District, Taipei, I volunteered on average two to three times per week, at least once on a weekday and once on the weekend; I spent between four and five hours there, from 9 am to 2 pm. As an inexperienced recycling volunteer, I was initially assigned to the area of plastic-bag recycling and later to those for paper, PET bottles, general classification, and finally electronic appliance dismantling. While learning and performing the work, I cultivated relationships with the volunteers, both non-commissioned and commissioned, and conducted interviews over working and lunch breaks. Given that the interactions and conversation with the volunteers at the Ba-de station took place in an informal and working setting, in principle, I introduced myself without providing the research summary document unless the volunteers showed interest in learning about my research; this included the environmental administrator of the station. I chose the Ba-de station as the site for volunteering because of its 'ordinary' nature and convenience. I use the term 'ordinary' to signal that the site was chosen for no particular reason other than that I sought to encounter a variety of people and volunteers without recourse to the categories of social/sociological analysis. The area in which the site is located—which I assessed based on my local and residential knowledge—is a mixed neighbourhood with newly developed high-rise condominiums and classic walk-up apartments,<sup>11</sup> filled with both modern commercial offices and traditional markets and vendors. This decision was also made out of practicality. Considering the planned frequency of my volunteering, the Ba-de station is one of the closest Tzu-chi recycling sites to National Taipei University, where I was based during my fieldwork.

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<sup>11</sup> Walk-up apartment buildings were the first type of multi-storey, multi-family housing in Taiwan; they originated in the 1960s, and they still dominate urban regions, including the Taipei cityscape, today (Lin and Chen 2015).

Second, I visited the Linmei village in Yilan County to understand the development and operation of its community recycling programme. I first learned of the village at a conference at Academia Sinica Taiwan in April 2016, when an attendee suggested Linmei as a possible option to study community recycling. Later, the presenter introduced me to a professor who had conducted long-term research at Linmei. Thanks to the professor's introduction, I gained trust from and access to the community association, which was followed by a series of observations of community activities, including its recycling, and access to official documents and digital data. Prior to the visit, I acquainted myself with background information about the Linmei community and its recycling through the Internet. This was when I realised the association between Linmei community recycling and Tzu-chi recycling in Yilan. To pursue this discovery, I visited several Tzu-chi recycling sites in Yilan that were led by the members of the Linmei community association, who were the key connections between Linmei and Tzu-chi.

Third, I conducted participant observations at organisational Tzu-chi recycling events. This included a large-scale, one-day volunteer gathering in New Taipei; its activities included religious rituals, lectures held in Taipei on environmental issues such as degradation and global warming, and volunteer testimonies. I also attended a bi-monthly meeting of the environmental administrators of Tzu-chi Harmony commissioners. I learned about both events from my participation at the Ba-de station. At both, interviews were conducted with community volunteers, commissioners, and environmental admins. Some were followed by a phone interview in July 2016. Aside from the organisational events, I visited several Tzu-chi recycling sites of varying sizes both inside and outside Taipei. When time allowed and the situation was suitable, I asked to recycle with the volunteers while talking to them. This effort helped create interactions with the informants, making the observation more situated, as well as easing the disruption created by my presence and observation.

In addition to the interviews conducted in situated circumstances of participant observation, which were mostly in informal settings, such as while working on waste or touring the sites, several additional 'formal' interviews were conducted. I use the term 'formal' to describe interviews conducted in a 'sit-and-talk' situation and which were semi-structured with open-ended questions designed in variable order for the research questions of interest. The 'formal' interviews were conducted with the official and working staff of the Tzu-chi headquarters, regional environmental cadres of Tzu-chi recycling, ordinary commissioners, and

representatives of a partner company of Tzu-chi recycling. The majority of these interviews were conducted with one individual respondent, with some exceptions in which groups were interviewed. The exceptions included an interview with three working staff members of the environmental protection team of the Tzu-chi Foundation, one with four regional environmental cadres (after the volunteer training event), and one with two representatives of Tzu-chi's partner company.

Aside from interviews and observational notes and transcriptions, I gathered a variety of Tzu-chi's institutional publications in order to gain insights into the structure and development of the organisation and its recycling engagement, as well as the institutional narratives on environmental issues and recycling practices. In table 1.2, I list the institutional publications I collected. Some of them are digital, while others are hard copy documents. This includes two full-length books on Tzu-chi's environmental mission authored by the founder, Cheng-yen, and published by the Tzu-chi Culture and Communication Foundation; one full-length book on Tzu-chi recycling volunteers authored by a journalist and published by a non-Tzu-chi institute; and one short children's book on Tzu-chi recycling volunteers published by the Tzu-chi Culture and Communication Foundation. I also obtained a 48-minute documentary video on the development of the Tzu-chi recycling project that the Tzu-chi Culture and Communication Foundation produced to celebrate the 25-year anniversary of the mission; this video was published on the YouTube channel of Da-ai TV.<sup>12</sup> In addition, I accessed 27 related articles and information from two webpages affiliated with the official Tzu-chi website. One is a specific webpage dedicated to celebrating Tzu-chi recycling's two-decade anniversary,<sup>13</sup> and the other is the subpage of the Tzu-chi official website designated to provide information on Tzu-chi's environmental mission.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uTvIjYob5dc> (accessed on 18 Oct 2020).

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.tzuchi-org.tw/projects/vege/index.php> (accessed on 18 Oct 2020).

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.tzuchi.org.tw/about-us/2017-11-20-01-15-13/%E7%92%B0%E4%BF%9D> (accessed on 18 Oct 2020).

Table 1.2 List of the collected Tzu-chi institutional publications

No.	Publication item	Date of publication	Source type
1	<i>Yu Diqu Gong Sheng Xi</i> (與地球共生息)	Mar-06	book, hardcopy
2	<i>Qing Jing Zai Yuan Tou</i> (清淨在源頭)	Dec-10	book, hardcopy
3	<i>Huanbao ren huishou wu</i> (環保人回收物)	Apr-13	book, hardcopy
4	<i>Granny Bottle</i> (瓶子阿嬤)	May-15	book, hardcopy
5	<i>Single-mindedly Protect the Earth: 25 Years of Tzu Chi's Environmental Protection</i> (一念心護大地 - 慈濟環保 25 年)	22-Aug-15	video, subtitled in Chinese and English
6	<i>Huanbao</i> (環保)	—	website page (in Chinese)
7	<i>Tzu-chi huanbao 20</i> (慈濟環保 20)	—	website page (in Chinese)
8	<i>Tzu Chi Almanac</i> , 1991 - 2004	1992 - 2005	annual publication (in Chinese), hardcopy
9	<i>Tzu Chi Almanac</i> , 2005 - 2018	2006 - 2019	annual publication (in Chinese), digital file
10	<i>Tzu Chi Monthly</i> , no. 290 - 625	1991 - 2017	monthly magazine (in Chinese), digital file
11	<i>Tzu Chi Bimonthly</i> , 2013 - 2017	2013 - 2017	Bimonthly magazine (in English), digital file

Moreover, the collection also included a total of 28 issues of the Tzu-chi Almanac from 1991 to 2018, 336 issues of the Tzu-chi monthly Chinese magazine from

1991 to 2017, and 18 issues of the Tzu-chi bimonthly English magazine<sup>15</sup> from 2013 to 2017. I accessed all the issues of the almanac from the official website of Tzu-chi,<sup>16</sup> with the exception of the Tzu-chi almanacs between 1991 and 2004, which were not digitalised. Instead, I gathered and made copies of these issues from the archive of the National Central Library of Taiwan. I assembled the digital files of the Tzu-chi Chinese and English magazines from the website of the Tzu-chi Culture and Communication Foundation.<sup>17</sup> Given the large number of issues of and articles in Tzu-chi's magazines, I specifically searched for articles containing six keywords and their related terms: recycling (回收<sup>18</sup>), waste (垃圾<sup>19</sup>), disposal (廢棄<sup>20</sup>), environment (環境<sup>21</sup>), environmental protection (環保<sup>22</sup>), nature (自然<sup>23</sup>), and earth (地球<sup>24</sup>). In addition to the listed publication items in table 1.2, I also tried to collect various forms of organisational materials of Tzu-chi recycling, including meeting notes, training materials, activity flyers, and internal reports.

Finally, for the data on the Linmei community recycling, in addition to participant observation, I conducted interviews and collected various forms of information materials. I interviewed two former chairmen and the current chairman of the community association, as well as the former and current team leaders of the community recycling programme. I also talked to the professor who introduced me to Linmei to obtain a fuller understanding of the developmental trajectory and the social relationships among the villagers. As part of the fieldwork, I gathered event leaflets, programme booklets, project proposals, diary logs, photo albums, and digital files of presentations. I accessed the official website of the Linmei

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<sup>15</sup> Although the magazine was originally bimonthly, between 2013 to 2017, it was issued each season.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.tzuchi.org.tw/about-us/%E6%85%88%E6%BF%9F%E6%AD%B7%E5%8F%B2/%E6%85%88%E6%BF%9F%E5%B9%B4%E9%91%91> (accessed on 18 Oct 2020).

<sup>17</sup> Tzu Chi Monthly (1991-2007): <https://web.tzuchiculture.org.tw/tpenquart/default/product/mon.htm>, Tzu Chi Monthly (2007-2017): <https://web.tzuchiculture.org.tw/index.php?s=2>, Tzu Chi Bimonthly: <https://web.tzuchiculture.org.tw/index.php?s=5> (accessed on 18 Oct 2020).

<sup>18</sup> huishou

<sup>19</sup> laji

<sup>20</sup> feiqi

<sup>21</sup> huanjing

<sup>22</sup> huanbao

<sup>23</sup> ziran

<sup>24</sup> diqiu

community association<sup>25</sup> and used the archive of the National Central Library and the United Daily News Group databases<sup>26</sup> to search for related journalistic reports. One of my data-capturing strategies was to ask for each of these kinds of materials at each stage. For instance, after an interview, I normally asked the interviewee whether she or he could show me some examples or materials related to the information they mentioned. Then, when they opened a folder or cabinet, I asked whether I could read more. After reading, I asked if I could take pictures of these printed materials or if there was a digital version that they could share with me.

### 6.3 Uncertainty and Positionality of the Researcher

In this final section, I reflect on the uncertainty in locating the subjectivities which appeared in the process of changing the dissertation's focus and working in the fieldwork situation. This is similar to an unpacking process to reconsider the positionalities of placing *self* and *the other* in the process of studying and representing a 'local' issue in a 'foreign' setting. Throughout the reflection, I consider that, rather than asking *who* is self and *who* is the other, in the era of academic globalisation, the question perhaps can be changed into *when* is self and *when* is the other. While contemplating the dilemmas I experienced, it is not my intention to fall into the rhetoric of self-indulgence or disciplinary insecurity. Rather, it is an attempt to recognise an open and relational self, sense of politics, and the labour of emotion involved in this research project. Since the discussion is a process of reflection on the inter-subjectivities of the researched, the researcher, and the researching environment, I quickly note that I was born in 1986 and raised in Taipei. I received my bachelor's degree in sociology in Taiwan before moving to the Netherlands for my graduate school study in 2010, and I have lived there since then. I was raised by a Christian family yet became largely agnostic after my undergraduate study.

In the earlier stage of this project, the research inquiry was to examine the socio-political structure of Taiwan's waste recycling. Learning about the Tzu-chi organisation and its recycling communities, its scale and diversity, and the number of related publications and commodities was rather a shocking process. Being unfamiliar with Buddhism and feeling overwhelmed by the scale of the organisation, I was initially reluctant to study Tzu-chi. Additionally, the

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.lm.org.tw/> (accessed on 18 Oct 2020).

<sup>26</sup> <https://udndata.com/ndapp/Index?cp=udn> (accessed on 18 Oct 2020).

prescribed assumption at the time was that religion and community-based recycling work such as that of Tzu-chi did not fall within the jurisdiction of my research on the 'macro' landscape of Taiwan's recycling movement. After my first visit to the Tzu-chi community recycling station in Kaohsiung in 2014, I wrote the following in my fieldwork diary:

Tzu-chi is overwhelmingly massive. Every station has its local community collection and sorting system. They process objects I haven't seen in other recycling yards (e.g., plastic bags and toys). There are numerous types (hierarchies?) of volunteers. [...] When the volunteer was explaining to me recycling with Buddhist(?) concepts (the disharmony of the Great Four), I was lost. I had no clue what they are talking about and if that was even Buddhism. My influent Minnanese contributed to the embarrassment. [...] My age, the ways I dressed and asked questions all made me an outsider. [...] I'm not sure that adding all this to my already too-much-going-on research table is a smart idea. (November 07, 2014).

Despite the initial resistance to including Tzu-chi as a focus of my study, it is not merely the case that my conception of the field has since expanded as a result of a commitment to take seriously the particularity of its systems, practices, discourses, participants, and networks. Fundamentally, the very micro/macro and soft-/hard-core dichotomy on which my initial position was premised was undermined by the fieldwork experience. At a later stage of the research project, another form of uncertainty emerged. It was related to Tzu-chi's public crisis, which took place in 2014 and 2015. By the time of my second round of fieldwork in 2016, Tzu-chi had just experienced three waves of public crisis and received irate public criticism because the organisation was involved in and at the centre of several national scandals and controversies, including a developmental project in a conservation area, a food safety issue, and the recycling economy (for more detail, see Chapter Five). Despite their wide support and many devotees, the public gradually began sharing critical and rather negative attitudes towards Tzu-chi, particularly the younger generation; they perceived Tzu-chi, whose members include numerous business elites and governmental officers, as a corrupt religious corporation that gained its secular power and financial profit in the name of religious and philanthropical acts. Tzu-chi recycling, in this interpretation, could be seen as an activity that celebrated the organisation's complacency rather than as evidence of an efficient environmental solution.

In addition to media reports and online discussions, it was not rare to encounter this perception of Tzu-chi during my fieldwork. For instance, I attended the Earth Day festival event in Taipei in 2015, in which more than 20 non-governmental and not-for-profit environmental organisations participated. Each had its own booth to advocate its objectives, including Tzu-chi. During my conversation with a Tzu-chi commissioner, one young-looking woman approached Tzu-chi's booth. After listening for several minutes, the young woman stopped the volunteer's presentation on Tzu-chi's recycling achievements and spiritual environmentalism. She then questioned whether the volunteer was aware of the recycling industry's 'ugly truths': without sufficient technology and financial incentives, recyclable materials were eventually incinerated, despite all the recycling efforts. 'These are all useless,' the woman concluded dismissively as she looked at Tzu-chi's flyers. Before the volunteer responded, the woman left. Moreover, during my second round of fieldwork, I noticed that the onsite experiences were slightly different from those I had in the winter of 2014 and spring of 2015. The volunteers became more sensitive to my purpose and institutional identity. During one visit, during an introductory tour of the site, a volunteer suddenly walked in and whispered into the ear of the commissioner giving the tour; later, the commissioner asked for identity clarification (even though I always provided my card and a sheet explaining my research in advance). It was not difficult to feel the sense of distrust. Occasionally, the volunteers stopped talking when I took out my camera, or they restated that the pictures were Tzu-chi's property. Their caution regarding representations seemed rather unusually formal to me given my knowledge of the Taiwanese community culture. After I became more acquainted with the volunteers, they joked about how they had suspected I was a journalist or told me stories of how their words were twisted by 'fake researchers'.

Because of these experiences, when interviewing the institutional representatives, the assumption was that access to the informant and information would be challenging. Surprisingly, the opposite was true. Facing great public pressure and many work tasks, the cadres and administrators had few opportunities to express their feelings to people who understood their work well enough. They wanted their voices to be heard and backed by scholars, which they think could help counter public opinion (however, I always responded by doubting how much I could help). The rather open responses from the interviewees were due to my volunteering engagement, which gave me some grounded insights into the work and system prior to the interviews. For my respondents, this was proof of being taken seriously, which led to a trusting attitude and inclusion when, for example,



they stated, 'You volunteered, so you know'. Furthermore, when in a rather alarming field situation, I gradually learned that emphasising my Dutch experience and institutional affiliation, as well as my ignorance about yet interest in Buddhism, significantly lowered the volunteers' and the staff members' guard, and they began to describe me as the 'faith seed' to spread Tzu-chi's philosophy into the younger population and foreign regions. The volunteers from different sites referred me as 'the young lady from the Netherlands' during my volunteering work. In other words, in the process, my relative identity shifted from one kind of *the other*, as the younger generation who could be hostile to Tzu-chi, into another *the other*, as a foreigner who could be their international ambassador. In other words, my 'foreign' and 'non-religious' otherness eased my transition into becoming *oneself*. Nevertheless, most of time, I found it difficult to adapt to Tzu-chi's 'traditional' manners and language, and the fact that I am not one of them was still obvious.

Outside the fieldwork, the fluidity of subjectivities took on another form and other directions. While presenting my shift in focus to Tzu-chi to my Taiwanese friends and academic fellows and scholars, often, the reaction I received was the expectation that this research would criticise Tzu-chi for its 'failing' public role and deconstruct the organisation's political economy. Another possible reaction was the assumption that switching to the Tzu-chi case was a 'career tactic' to write 'something that interests Westerners'. When my Taiwanese 'fellows' learned of my interest in Tzu-chi's community culture and the Buddhist environmental discourses, there were sometimes jokes about 'whitening research' or warnings about Tzu-chi's unreceptiveness and being careful to avoid being 'brainwashed'. In those conversations, I felt a sense of becoming a 'betrayal' to my young and critical Taiwanese pupils and of losing 'local authenticity' in their eyes. Nevertheless, to a certain degree, the assumption that a study of Buddhism-based community recycling would interest international scholarship was correct. During presentations at international conferences, seminars, and workshops, I received more reactions, comments, and questions, often on Tzu-chi's cultural and religious discourses on environmental issues and recycling in comparison with other sections of Taiwan's recycling industry, governmental policies, and community recycling systems. One European scholar encouraged me to focus on the case of Tzu-chi, saying, 'We hear relatively similar issues regarding waste here and there, but this is something different'. Despite knowing that the scholar had a point, in those situations, the expectation was nevertheless that my local knowledge of the mysterious Eastern religion could offer an alternative

environmentalism to global society, but my research inquiry was to contextualise Tzu-chi's recycling movement in the social, economic, and political changes of contemporary Taiwan.

In other words, by noting different scholarly interests throughout the research project, I found myself caught between two 'choices,' two sets of dichotomised assumptions, concerning what the research *should* be about. At one end, there was the 'hard-core political-economic approach', the 'anti-Tzu-chi', 'critical approach,' and 'research for oneself (i.e., the Taiwanese)'. At the other end, there was the 'soft-core cultural approach', which was 'pro-Tzu-chi' and concerned 'mystical Eastern religion' and 'research for the Others (i.e., Westerners)'. Each side has received both criticism and support from different groups. Even though these labels appear to be rigid, they nonetheless represent broader social contexts in which the conflicting perceptions of Tzu-chi recycling and my study of it should be further located and considered. These reflections reveal the fluidity of inter-subjective positionality; the question of who is the local and who is foreign no longer has a definite answer. In the era of academic globalisation, the normative division between self and the other does not necessarily resonate with the geographical categories of, in my case, Asian and Westerner. I can be the other as the younger generation, the Western-trained scholar, or the 'local' student from Asia. The researcher's subject positionality is open for interpretation and dependent on those who are 'researched', both inside and outside the field.