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

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## **Chapter Two |**

### **Theoretical Points of Departure: Waste and Nostalgia**

This chapter provides an overview of some of the theoretical points and scholarly discussions that have influenced this dissertation as a whole. There are two main bodies of literature, the first of which concerns waste. This literature's primary contribution is in framing the object of study and determining how it is approached: as an inquiry into Taiwanese society through waste recycling and vice versa. This body of waste literature predominantly includes works from scholars in the fields of sociology, geography, anthropology, political science, history, and cultural studies. Despite its wide variety, the scholarship shares a key view that waste is socially constructed, that is, 'what people define as waste varies with time, space, culture, and social group' (Gille 2011, 833). In this review of relevant works of waste scholarship, I first discuss those which examine waste in terms of its material agency and symbolic meaning before moving to those focusing on the theme of recycling. The second body of literature explores the topic of nostalgia, and it provides theoretical concepts and orientations as analytical tools to make sense of the tendencies I observed. In this part of the review, I examine works on nostalgia as a cultural phenomenon related to modernity, the dialectical dynamics between restorative and prospective aspects of nostalgia, and finally its relation to environment-related changes.

Before continuing, I should mention that, in certain chapters, a summary of the literature on Tzu-chi recycling or religious environmentalism is necessary to

provide information on less-studied and lesser-known matters. As those bodies of literature are necessary but do not give the dissertation its overall analytical thread, they are referred to as the need arises.

## 1. Waste Studies

Often, in scenarios such as public debates and discussions on policy reform or environmental risks, the images of waste that most readily come to mind—trash, discards, leftovers, refuse, rubbish, junk, or garbage—are those of household rubbish or the mass solid waste of the population. Dirty packaging materials are scattered on beaches, or they float in the ocean or clutter municipal sewage systems; heaps of cheap, broken consumer durables pile up in unrecognisable strange lands. Waste, in this imagination, signifies humankind's alienated and abusive relationship with nature and emblematises a society's perplexities regarding its disposability. Waste is thus a self-evident problem waiting to be solved and eradicated. The social relevance of waste is therefore mainly identified with and motivated by the (negative) consequences of discarded materials. Accordingly, works in the social sciences mostly discuss waste in terms of metric tonnes and targets, in relation to its management, its disposal technology, and related policy. The issues of waste thus predominantly belong to concerns about environmental policy and urban planning, while the fields of technical and environmental engineering address the materials of waste and its treatment.

The literature on Taiwan's waste shares this trait and similarly positions waste as a challenge to material and environmental engineering, on the one hand, and subject to policy operationalism and economic rationalism on the other. This includes studies of waste reduction (Lu et al. 2006; Su et al. 2010), the not-in-my-backyard environmental movement against waste disposal sites (Shen and Yu 1997; Chiou et al. 2011), the environmental justice movement (Fan 2007), renewable energy utilisation (Tsai and Chou 2006; Tsai 2016), waste composition and material characteristics (Chang et al. 2008; Chang and Hsu 2008), waste reuse and recycling technologies (Wei and Huang 2001), waste treatment schemes (Tsia et al. 2007; Young et al. 2010), waste governance (Wong 2017), waste policy transformation and evaluation (Liu 1999; Chen and Huang 2003; Weng and Fuijwara 2011), economic incentives in waste management (Fan et al. 2005; Yang and Innes 2007), and the recycling businesses and industry (Hsu and Kuo 2002; Wen and Lo 2007; Terao 2008).

The problematisation of waste as contaminating and hazardous and the operationalisation of waste as a management target preclude the possibility of alternative understandings of the complexities of our relationships with waste and the consequences of waste. In a framework where ‘waste can only be bad’ and ‘make us feel bad’ (Hawkins 2005, 9), the cultural studies scholar Gay Hawkins has argued, the ‘ecologically destructive practices’ of waste disposal which constantly ‘resource to guilt or moralism or despair’ (*ibid.*, ix) could result in an unintended consequence: people’s experience of ‘moral fatigue’ and an overburdened feeling leading to inaction (*ibid.*, 12). In this register, scholars in the social sciences and the humanities have endeavoured to explore how and why ‘waste matters’ by suspending judgements of waste as a threat from multiple vantage points. Rather, waste is considered a massive and quintessential part of contemporary society, a multi-faceted and dynamic category with socially generative capacities. The scholarship examines the material agency as well as symbolic meanings of waste, asking what defines waste and also examining other questions: How does waste both express social values and changes and sustain them? What specific capacities and affordances characterise waste materials? Who works on waste, and what do they become together in specific entanglements of power, labour, and possibility? How does specific waste circulate and with what significance for national and global processes?

With regard to how waste shapes a society, sociological works on waste and wasting focus on the ways in which waste and its materiality are organised and sustained through social, economic, political, and technological relationships. In this framing, waste is a contested social process where different social institutions determine what ‘things’ are valuable and that what we do with waste is subject to different, sometimes conflicting, regulations and valuation systems. As the sociologist Martin O’Brien has described, the social afterlife of things is both a ‘site of political-economic conflicts’ (O’Brien 1999a, 271) and the ‘intersection of different interests’ (2007, 108). O’Brien’s thesis on ‘rubbish society’ (1999a, 1999b, 2007) is an important point of departure in this literature. For O’Brien, the industrialised societies of our contemporary world are ‘rubbish societies’, societies with ‘modes of self-understanding whose political, social, and cultural systems are infused by a relationship to waste and wasting’ (1999b, 272). To a degree, this perspective resonates with Ulrich Beck’s idea of ‘risk society’, which suggests that, in the most developed societies, political concerns are more associated with the distribution of ‘bads’, that is, environmental and health risks, rather than the ones of ‘goods’, such as income and assets (Gille 2011, 834).

However, O'Brien has noted that those rubbish societies are paradoxically marked by a sense of denial that waste is a basis on which industrial societies develop and change. In analysing complex social arrangements that involve a broad range of institutions, regulations, and technologies in the circulation and transformation of wastes, the concept of *waste-regime* the sociologist Zsuzsa Gille (2007; 2010) has proposed offers a macro-level framework to study the sociology of waste: its production, representation, and politics. Based on her study of waste history in socialist and capitalist Hungary, Gille demonstrates how waste is 'not a residue but constitutive of the social' (2010, 1060). Rather than something that moves across pre-existing spatial scales and social networks, rubbish as discarded objects actively constructs them, shaping the material-social order and relations.

Approaching the topic from more of a micro-level, other studies analyse the active connections between humans and wasted material, arguing that both are mutually produced and changed. To animate the connection between the social and the physical aspects of waste, Hawkins (2005) draws on Bill Brown's perspective on the relational dynamic between persons and things, including its emphasis on habits, material perception, and the constitution of subjectivity, to articulate a vision of waste practice as a process of self-making. She contends that, on a daily level, dealing with trash implies an organised sequence of material practice that involves certain knowledges, bodily techniques, and assumptions of classification. It is a social performance, Hawkins posits, in which 'we decide what is connected to us and what isn't' (*ibid.*, 4). It is a practice to establish a sense of order, the ordering of self. In other words, interactions with waste in all its various forms are 'deeply implicated in the practice of subjectivity' (Hawkins and Mueck 2003, xiii).

In the recognition of the self's creation in and through relations with waste matter, the anthropologist Josh Reno (2009) provides an example based on his ethnography at a large Michigan landfill in the United States. He has presented scavenging and dumping as a form of masculinity and social class expression for the male workers. On the other hand, focusing on the entanglements among women, the state, and waste in Japan, Rebecca Tompkins (2019) has argued that waste-related tasks have been a gendered vehicle for Japanese women to demonstrate and shape their civic roles. Examples of such cases include organising waste campaigns during wartime or a voluntary recycling association in the present. In the case of the Netherlands, Ruth Oldenziel and Milena Veenis (2013) have explained that the development of the glass bottle recycling scheme

in the 1970s was the result of a group of Dutch housewives who mobilised their wartime saving habits. This analytical thinking provides an inspiration for this dissertation to explore the relations of waste practice, identities, and past experience in the analysis of Tzu-chi volunteers. Addressing the role of history, Oldenziel and Veenis have suggested that the understanding of a contemporary waste-related activism should not be read solely as a result of identity performance, which, in their case, is gender. In their view, it is necessary to explore what this identity means as part of a longer tradition and broader culture of the given social context, as well as the habits and value systems associated with this identity that give rise to the forms and meanings of a waste practice. In the case of Dutch glass bottle recycling, it was the endeavour of a generation that grew up with the tradition of wartime preservation and the thrift culture of post-war recovery; this experience was mobilised in relation to their gendered task of housekeeping and a new purpose in affluent, environmentally aware societies. The Dutch recycling movement of glass bottle, in this view, is a historical continuum and shift of individuals' previous relation with materials grounded in and inspired by their gender identity.

The contingency and performativity of waste matter, however, is related not only to the political process of societal organisation and self-narrative, the aspects this chapter has addressed so far. It also concerns the (re)production of a specific group's deprivation and exclusion. In tracing the emergence of large-scale production and the systematic treatment of waste in northern European cities in the late 18th century, which saw intensified urbanisation and industrialisation, the historian Martin V. Melosi (1981) has noted that this period is when the traditional approach to dealing with waste as a practice of household thrift, reusing, and recycling became a public affair, leading to the professionalisation of urban waste disposal. Since then, waste has been banished from the sight of middle- and upper-class citizens and left to regions and people on the fringe. The structural tendencies serve to the alignment of the casting of certain materials, people, places, and conducts, those who/which threatening to the accumulative logic of capitalist value production and security state apparatuses (Bauman 2004; Gidwani 2013). From there, the idea of a 'social residuum' was formed to refer to people who were thought to be beyond redemption or transformed to serve in the new social imagination (Alexander and Reno 2012, 7). Class, race, ethnicity, religion, or life experience could all be indicators of who should hold badly paid, stigmatised waste jobs, whether it is Roma in eastern Europe (Gille 2011),

unemployed homeless people in the United States (Gowan 1997), or Coptic Christians in Egypt (Furniss 2010).

In other words, with the capacity to consolidate social order, power, scale, and hierarchy (Murdoch 1998, 329), we see the material agency of waste, an agency that call the societies and people to undertake practice and have a specific way of living. As waste matter circulates and transforms, it mixes with people and places. As a material thing, waste not only enable but also invite actions (Olsen 2010; Metcalfe et al. 2013). As Olsen argues, 'things make a difference ... they are real entities that possess their own unique qualities and competence which they bring to our cohabitation to them' (2010, 156).

The discussion so far has aimed to emphasise the agency of waste and its constitutive significance in shaping social worlds. However, it also reveals the symbolic capacity of waste. If waste practice and management consolidate the social order, then the reverse is also the true: the logic of the classification system produces waste, and sociality foregrounds our interactions and experience with waste. In short, waste is more than a social process; it is also a mirror or intermediary through which to reflect on ourselves. What one puts into a trash bin reveals details about that person, about one's bodily conditions and commodity fetishes, emotions, and income. Following a similar logic, through the lens of waste, we see a society's underlying principles: its values, norms, taboos, and beliefs.

This symbolic conception of waste is the legacy of the anthropologist Mary Douglas's classic *Purity and Danger* (1966). Douglas examined many kinds of beliefs about pollution, and her definition of dirt remains fundamental for approaches to waste in human science (Neville and Villeneuve 2002; Scanlan 2005; Knechtel 2007). Douglas showed that, for something to be filthy, polluting, or dangerous, it must violate some ideal sense of the ways things ought to be. In her words, 'dirt, then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements' (1966, 36). In her view, dirt is a matter of an 'in-between' state, an object bereft of its systemic functionality that has yet to be removed and allocated to its subsequent cultural and political 'place'. Dirt is thus not outside of the order but endangers it, while making systems of order visible. In a contemporary setting, waste substances function in a way that is similar to a revelation. As the rejected, waste materials represent a basic cognitive and existential dilemma (Moser 2002).



So far, the discussion has presented the agency and symbolic aspects of waste. The analytical approach in this dissertation has been shaped by the dialectical relation between two ‘contrasted’ aspects, as the waste scholarship often frames it, that distinguish their own approaches: the material context versus the symbolic-structure account (Reno 2015), the action-oriented versus the symbol-oriented approach (Furniss 2010), or ‘making us who we are’ versus ‘telling us who we are’ (Evans 2011a). My goal in this dissertation, however, is not to align with a dichotomous ‘side’. Instead, the analysis moves between the two to consider waste both in terms of its practical value in a system of agency and sign value in a system of communication/disclosure. One way to do this is by changing the analytical views between those of the actors, namely the volunteers, communities, and the organisation of Tzu-chi recycling, and those of the economic, political, and cultural frameworks of Taiwan. This is seen, for example, in Chapters 3 and 4, where I discuss the relation among the recycling practice, objects, and volunteers from the perspectives of economic structure and individual life-course.

Concerning the symbolic aspect of waste, two points deserve additional emphasis here because of their influence on the ways in which the following chapters explore what waste represents as well as what represents ‘the wasted’ in Tzu-chi recycling. The first is that waste objects embody insights and memories regarding the cultures and circumstances that produce them; the second concerns the metaphorical conception of waste.

The first proposition could be perhaps best explained by a mention of ‘garbaology’, which applies the methods of archaeology to the study of garbage. Garbaologists have treated waste sites as archives of history with ‘lodes of information’ (Rathje and Murphy 2001, 4), while historiography has taken up rubbish as an object of knowledge, techniques, and relations—records and reminders of previous and existing social worlds. Waste is thus ‘a mess with a message’ (Yaeger 2003, 114). For Walter Moser, this way of positioning discarded artefacts indicates an exploration of the memory component of waste. By referring to Douglas’s view on dirt as matter in a state of ‘in-between’, Moser has suggested that, in those transitional moments, ‘the waste-object still conserves all memorial capacities with regard to the system to which it once belonged’. As long as it remains in between, the ‘memory-identity’ of discards can be revived. For Moser, this memory component of waste objects turns a scientific curiosity about human discards into an exploration of ‘the temporal dimension of the cultural phenomenon designed by memory’ (2002, 98).

The second point regards waste as a metaphor, an attempt to de-materialise waste and address it as a cultural conceptual category. In *Purity and Danger*, Douglas conceives of society as a system presupposing the distinction between positions inside and outside, and she postulates that all aspects of such a system—economic, social, medical, or religious—work in an integrated manner. For her, the distinction between the interior and the exterior is fundamental to give rise to gestures of inclusion and exclusion in any system so that what has lost value and utility can be branded as ‘waste’ and ‘impure’ and therefore rejected. Waste, as a symbolic idea, thus signifies an ontological as well as semantic negativity that grounds cultural categories of efficiency/inefficiency, usefulness/uselessness, order/disorder, and productive/unproductive (Gille 2011). In other words, with moral overtones, waste as a cultural concept encompasses a series of identifications: the bottom, the intruders, the outmoded, the unproductive, the decayed, and other failures to observe social and cultural prescriptions concerning value systems. The objectification of waste is thus not only discarded material but also includes people, belief, place, norm, and language.

However, its exclusion renders waste’s potentiality, which ‘symbolises both danger and power’ (Douglas 1966, 95). As Moser reminds us, if order implies restriction, waste, a status of ‘in-between’ which spoils the pattern, thus ‘represents, in terms of the system, a potential source of revitalisation’ (2002, 91). Hawkins and Mueck have described this transient power of waste as a process of ‘redemption’, showing that something of declining worth, which was once regarded as impurity, can find itself newly valued once it crosses the fringe zone (2003, xi-xii). Through these processes, rubbish can become a source of energy, profit, or form of art. One of the first analyses of waste along these lines was the anthropologist Michael Thompson’s book *Rubbish Theory* (1979), which centred around the process of value change in society. Thompson offers an approach that is synchronous with Douglas’s yet concedes a historical dimension of the systems under biographical histories to ‘stuffs’. According to Thompson, every system (in terms of value change) has a history, which is the biography of concrete objects. For him, the biography of every artefact is articulated in three stages, characterised by changes in what value the object opposes: from ‘transient value’ to ‘zero value’ to ‘permanent value.’ Thompson hypothesises that the process of value change necessarily involves the category of rubbish, the stage of ‘zero value’, and thereby affirms the condition of ‘worthlessness’ as playing a dynamic role in the loss and regeneration of value. This complexity of waste, its possibility of value transformation, is nevertheless displayed vividly in the process of recycling.

## 1.1 Literature on Recycling

Recycling is by no means a contemporary invention. In the 19th century, it was common for paper to be made from recycled rags (Evans 2011a); for centuries, across different societies, the results of human digestion, night soil, have been systematically collected for agricultural fertilisation (Kawa et al. 2019). In their study of the history of recycling in Europe, Oldenziel and Weber (2013) trace the term 'recycling' to the 1920s technology of returning production residues to the refinery process in the oil industry. While 'recycling' appeared to be more of an engineering term in the early 20th century, waste utilisation was instead referred to as 'salvage', 're-use', and 'recuperation.' According to Oldenziel and Weber (2013), the 1960s and 1970s are an anchor point in recycling history; the once-technical term acquired a particular meaning in the affluent, post-modern environmental era, and it became tinged with economic, political, social, and environmental meanings. In today's terms, 'recycling' involves two types of work: the ordinary reuse and appropriation of used objects and the technical transformation of materials to substitute the use of virgin materials in further rounds of commodity production.

In recent decades, recycling has risen to the top of the global political agenda (Alexander and Reno 2012). Moral norms, such as environmental citizenship, and legal sanctions play an important role in encouraging individuals, households, and institutes to dispose of things in ways that make use of recycling infrastructures. In this political and moral framework, the act of recycling is mostly portrayed as a green conscious engagement rather than an economic process or waste labour (Wheeler and Glucksmann 2015). Further, one aim of the recycling movement is to have an alternative solid waste treatment beyond building repositories and incinerators (MacBride 2010). However, as Samantha MacBride has critically noted in her research on the recycling industry and policy in the United States, this kind of recycling political agenda nevertheless emphasises 'consensus over conflicts, and an implicit theory of social change rooted in notion of education and moral/psychological growth rather than in state regulation and structural reform' (*ibid.*, 4). Additionally, what is left out in the public image of recycling is its economic nature in relation to the global production chain. In addressing the economic aspect of recycling on a global scale, Nicky Gregson et al. (2013) have addressed not the material or behaviour but the *system* which allows this transition; they have therefore defined recycling as a 'reflexive intervention in economic activity which extends the boundaries of markets, by internalising

objects formerly externalised as wastes and by attending to the temporal properties of materials' (2013, 1). In this regard, waste scholarship has endeavoured to reveal the sheer scale of the global trade in secondary materials. Scholars have noted that the 'global destruction networks' of recycling (Herod et al. 2013) not only disclose the unequal relationship between rich and poor areas of the world, but also reveal the newly emerging economies in post-colonial and post-socialist contexts, where there has been an increasing demand for materials for infrastructural expansion, energy, and consumer goods (Lepawsky and McNabb 2010; Norris 2010; Crang et al. 2013; Wang et al. 2020).

Meanwhile, accounts of the technical aspects of recycling have been the subject of industrial analysis approaches, including life cycle, material flow analysis (MFA), and industrial ecology. Following the hypothesis of constant reconfiguration in physics and the principles of the conservation of energy and mass balance in closed systems, these approaches trace material and energy movement and transformation. To their credit, the materialist analysis systems provide abundant data with apparent and computational measurements of matter circulation and environmental impacts, which are useful for policy and management use. However, when mapping datasets of global waste flows, the modelling of input-output obscures what lies behind their production, their entanglements with local politics, economies, boundaries, regulations, and people. As Alexander and Reno have noted, these are 'among the very things that determine where and how materials move' (2012, 13). For example, by examining the global trade flows of used clothing and end-of-life merchant ships, Mike Crang et al. (2013) have highlighted how the flow is coordinated by highly complex and brokered forms of governance. Instead of being dominated by large transactional corporations or apparent governmental institutions, Crang et al. suggest that the key role is that of small-scale businesses, who act as intermediary agents to bridge the societal embeddedness of local actors and expertise, a process which is largely grounded in ethnic familiarity and traders' trust relations.

If recycling is a process of transforming the zero-value of unwanted objects into production resources, then it essentially reflects the nature of value creation, recovery, connection, and exchange (Alexander and Reno 2012). As Gavin Bridge (2009, 1220) has claimed, '[r]esources are not, they become.' Regardless of the waste stream involved, this 'becoming' process is, in Reno's words, an 'open-ended transformation made possible through the productive combination of human creativity, the material vitality of wastes themselves, and the physical surroundings where they come to rest' (2015, 562). In other words, the work of

unmaking is an appreciation for the capacities of things, not only for ‘what it is’ as a discarded object but for what it ‘might become’ (Gregson et al. 2010, 853). Such waste labour is the result of an entanglement among bodies, knowledges, technologies, infrastructures, and substances whereby some elements are assembled, and others expelled. In this sense, recycling is similar to any productive activity. However, in addition to multiple, mutable, and even conflicting forms of value that are unmade and remade at any one moment (Alexander and Reno 2012, 24), a focus on recycling affords a confrontation of a waste practice as a way of managing loss that ‘involves not destruction, but restoration, care, and mindfulness’. It is the ‘arts of transience’, according to Hawkins (2001, 19), by which people creatively reuse materials and remake their own lives and relationships.

In short, recycling as a determinant process reveals the complexity of the paradigm of waste to address its ambiguity and the power that arises between value and void, end and origin, as well as its possibility of making through unmaking and redemption through restoration. This dialectical modality of value and process inversion is central to the orientation of this dissertation. The dissertation further develops this insight in relation to a temporal aspect and the rhetoric of recycling as redemption. This is connected to earlier discussions on the symbolic aspect of waste.

In the introductory chapter of *Waste-Site Story: The Recycling of Memory*, Neville and Villeneuve postulate that, if waste materials are the ‘remnants of the past’, recycling thus is a ‘mixing of temporalities’ (2002, 7). Similar to Moser’s articulation on the ‘memory-identity’ of discarded objects, Neville and Villeneuve propose that the relation between disposal and recycling serves as a vantage point to reflect upon the relation between memory and forgetting. According to them (as well as Moser), if what waste recycling presuppose is not materials’ transformation or destruction, but rather the operation of recovery, it implies ‘an intrusion of the past into the present’ (Moser 2002, 102). Recycling thus represents the paradigm of cultural production today: it is an embodiment of the world in which we are living, one of ‘heterogeneous temporalities in which past and present, the traditional and the technological sophisticated overlaps’ (Neville and Villeneuve 2002, 6). Following this line of thought, this dissertation considers such ‘memory recycling’ an implication of nostalgia—an operation of collecting and utilising the once-discarded yet desired past. Furthermore, the rhetoric of recycling is often tinged with connotations of redemption. In the language of recycling, materials are ‘salvaged’, while polluted lands are ‘saved’ (Alexander and

Reno 2012, 26-27). Through the entanglement of discarded materials, people, and places, restoration not only extends the useful life of objects but the lives of those rejected, recovering their 'usefulness' of being social citizens and commodity producers, to include them again in developmental schemes. As the following chapters show, this redemptive rhetoric of recycling, together with waste metaphors, takes on meaning in the volunteers' self-narratives, community operations, and institutional motifs of Tzu-chi recycling.

## 2. Literature on Nostalgia

Nostalgia is a composite feeling of loss, attachment, and yearning. Contrary to our intuition, the term 'nostalgia' did not come from literature or politics but medicine. Etymologically derived from the combination of the Greek *nostos* (home-return) and *-algia* (specific pain), the term was coined by the Swiss physician Johannes Hofner in the 17th century to a diagnose medical disorder often associated with prolonged and involuntary absences from home, particularly among war soldiers (Pickering and Keightley 2006, 921-2). By the end of the 19th century, however, the formerly 'geographical condition' caused by 'the gap between where we are and where we once were and/or where we want to be' (Bonnett 2016, 2) took a temporal turn, involving a shift from a longing for a place to a yearning for a different time. Today, nostalgia in ordinary parlance is invariably connected to sentimentalisation and an idealised version of the proximate past in comparison to a dissatisfied present, which is often coupled with an indifference towards the future. It involves an awareness of the distance between now and then and a sense of feeling oneself to be a stranger in time (Lowenthal 1989; Boym 2001; Pickering and Keightley 2006; Bauman 2017).

Seeing nostalgia as 'a result of a new understanding of time and space', the scholar of literature and art Svetlana Boym, whose work *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001) has been influential in the study of nostalgia, has explained that nostalgia as 'a historical emotion' has become the 'symptom of our age' (2007, 8). She writes: 'The 20th century began with futuristic utopias and dreams of unending development and ended with nostalgia and quests for restoration' (Boym 2010b). Nostalgia is everywhere and is often the subject of the study of mass culture. Nostalgia is seen in its institutionalised form as heritage museums, analysed as in terms of its appearance in different media, tourism experiences, and other forms of cultural commodities (Lee 2006; Davidson, Park and Shields 2011; Niemeyer 2014; McClinchey 2016). Comparable observations of a 'global epidemic of

nostalgia' (Glazer 2005, 36) indicate that the prevalence of the appeal to a glorious past has accompanied numerous global political movements, such as the 'Velvet Revolution' in Eastern Europe and the end of Soviet Union (Boym 2007, 10), and it has become a prominent feature in recent Western European and U.S. politics (Demos 2018), for example in the case of the Brexit referendum and, in the United States, Donald Trump's presidential election campaign in 2016.<sup>27</sup>

Scholars have nevertheless identified a low reputation associated with nostalgia, a kind of the 'negatively the othered' (Pickering and Keightley 2006, 920) and the 'political sinister' (Natali 2004, 19) based on a series of oppositions: conservatism and progressiveness, servitude and freedom, myths and truths. The retrograde is faulted for its inaccurate view of history and the attempt to attain what is empirically untenable. For Marco Piason Natali, the struggle between the past and the future reveals the political tension between the political left and right. He has noted that, while 'the very word used to refer to the left in English and other European languages—variations of *progress*—emphasises commitment to the future', the adversary of the left—*conservative* and *reactionary*—'suggests devotion to the past' (*ibid.*, 13). In postulating the idea that nostalgia as a chronic facet of socialist and revolutionary thought has in fact been fundamental to the political left, one defender of nostalgia, the geographer Alastair Bonnett (2010; 2016), has raised the question of whether nostalgia is more sentimental than the 'wishful vision[s] of future [...] that are so prominent within progressive politics' (2012, 10). He points to the fact that the criticism of nostalgia reveals the disjuncture between private and public expressions of nostalgia. While personal attachments to the past are 'valued as signs of humanity and character' (2016, 15), in public, nostalgia is associated with a defeatist attitude of melancholy, a regressive stance with utopian impulses. Both Natali (2004) and Bonnett (2010) have suggested that the notoriety of nostalgia as counter-productive is rooted in 18th- and 19th-century liberal ideology and its dialectical reasoning. According to Natalie, this is seen, for example, in the writings of Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, as well as the comments Karl Marx made in 'The Eighteenth Brumaire' in 1852: 'The social revolution of the 19th century can-not draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped off all superstition about the past. [...] the revolution of the 19th century must let the dead bury their dead' (1979, 106).

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<sup>27</sup> See for example Flinder (2018), Novack (2016), Gaston (2018).

Paradoxically, however, nostalgia arises in modernity. As Bruno Latour has noted, like ‘two symmetrical results of a single conception of time,’ modern ideas of progress and newness and the anti-modern claims of recovery and tradition appear to be ‘twins who failed to recognise one another’ (1993, 76). Regressive yearning emerges because of the sense of disorientation and the rupture of an experience of continuity in the face of relentless social uprooting and moving forward. In other words, the longing for the past appears in the departure from it (Davis 1979; Blunt 2003; May 2017). This cultural paradox of ‘*in and against* modernity’ that is characteristic of nostalgia, Bonnett contends, is the key aspect of nostalgia’s power, as it ‘transgress[es] and affronts modernity’s hubris’ (2016, 6). For Boym (2001; 2008; 2010a), nostalgia is a manifestation of the ‘off-modern’ tradition. According to her, the ‘off-modern’ perspective proposes a non-linear conception of cultural evolution through trial and error, offering critical reflections on the modern condition and deterministic narratives of history. Using Walter Benjamin’s expression, Boym (2010c) has written, it is ‘*to brush history against the grain* [...] to understand the preposterous aspects of our present’. Focusing on a variety of ‘off-modern’ art works, Boym nevertheless notes that, for off-modernists, those who are often in marginal cultural positions or who are displaced, ‘creative rethinking of nostalgia was not merely an artistic device but a strategy for survival’ (2007, 9). In this register, nostalgia functions as a countering force and defence mechanism which ‘not only search[es] for ontological security in the past, but also as a means of taking one’s bearings for the road ahead in the uncertainties of the present’ (Pickering and Keightley 2006, 921).

To open up a ‘different conceptual territory’ (Natali 2004, 23) to articulate the active and productive potential of nostalgia and to move beyond the premise of the past as something to be discarded, scholars have pointed to nostalgia’s double-side nature. One side is retrospective, and the other is prospective. Boym (2001) has proposed a typology to distinguish these two aspects as restorative and reflective nostalgia. Emphasising that these distinctions are not absolute binaries, she explains that restorative nostalgia implies a utopian imagination which ‘attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home’, while reflective nostalgia thrives on the longing itself, suggesting an invitation to recall and dwell on the ambivalence of human belonging (2007, 13). Similarly, Natali highlights the differences in responses to the loss by referring to Sigmund Freud’s ideas about mourning and melancholia. In contrast to a pathological melancholia, which is a refusal of loss, Natali views mourning as a ‘healthy response’ ‘working through’



of acceptance to the realisation that ‘the lost object of affection indeed no longer exist[s] and that no amount of effort will make it return’ (2004, 19).

According to these scholars, to have productive and positive nostalgia, the value transaction of memory is key. While nostalgia can stop this transaction, the recognition of the rupture between past and present itself can also become a bridge to bring the past and present into dialogue. In this register, nostalgia functions as an initiating mechanism to reconfigure the past towards action, ‘as a mode of assimilating this to the rapidly changing modern environment’ (Pickering and Keightley 2006, 923). This ‘remaking process’ of memory and the past ‘involves a back-and-forth movement through time as we compare our past and present selves, by which we construct a culturally appropriate sense of a coherent self’ (May 2017, 402). In this register, the past becomes a *recycled* resource to ‘insert itself into a present sensation from which it borrows the vitality’ (Bergson 1988, 240, cited in Boym 2007, 16), becoming the elements and basis for ‘renewal and satisfaction in the future’ (May 2017, 404).

For the sociologist Vanessa May, using nostalgia as a technique to construct a continuous self not only suggests that ‘time itself is a source of belonging and an interpretive resource’ (*ibid.*, 406), but also, as her research endeavours to show, it reveals different forms of temporal belonging. Based on her study of written accounts from the British Mass Observation Projects, May elucidates the key functions of memory in relation to temporal belonging by drawing on Henri Bergson’s (1988, 80-81) identification of two types of memory. ‘Memory-in-action’, explains May, is ‘memories that are imprinted in our body and enacted in the present, for example in the forms of habitual practice’; ‘memory-image’, meanwhile, can pull us back from the present and send us ‘traveling down “the slope of our past” when recollecting past events’ (2017, 403). According to May, memories-in-action imply a temporal belonging in the ‘here and now’, while the memory-image indicates one in the past, or in May’s words, ‘from afar’. The distinction between a recollection of the past that is an embodied habit in the present and a recollection of the past as a recalled representational image is particularly useful for this research to identify different forms of nostalgia in Tzu-chi recycling at individual, communal, and institutional levels. It provides an analytical approach to allude to the embodiment of the temporal belongings in the process in which the past is deployed and assembled. However, it should be noted that May’s notion of belonging from afar does not exclusively mean a desire to return to the past, nor is it the kind of restorative nostalgia in Boym’s usage. As she explains regarding one of her three types of belonging from afar, *temporal*

*displacement* and *place nostalgia*, ‘memories of past belonging can be used to create a sense of belonging *in* the present, if not *to* the present’ (*ibid.*, 409).

## 2.1 Literature on Environmental Nostalgia

Few scholarly works have explored the relationship between nostalgia and environment-related changes (Mukta and Hardiman 2000; Albrecht 2005; Davis 2010; Bonnett 2016; Iambacher 2017; Askland and Bunn 2018). With regard to environmentalism as an effort to restore what once flourished in nature, some scholars have proposed that nostalgia has long been fundamental to the environmental movement, and that, because of its ‘affective and cognitive aspects’, it has been ‘one of the most potent rhetorical tools for green politics’ (Davis 2010, 265; Iambacher 2017). To elucidate the pertinent role of nostalgia in the development of environmental imagination, Mukta and Hardiman have written, ‘in seeking to counter the grand narrative of capitalist “progress” with an alternative narrative of its own [...] visions of a better, more sustainable ecological future are tied to a variety of interpretations of the past’ (2000, 113). For many ecological thinkers, from Aldo Leopold to Rachel Carson, the loss of familiar experiences of and in environments—the sound of birds, the quietness of the woods, the surrounding farms, and the closeness to the sea—point to an alienation of people from nature. This ecological nostalgia, Mukta and Hardiman have argued, indicates a strong, continuing tradition in ecological theory of ‘locating the organic Arcadia in peasant society’, a tradition that is tinged with ‘Edenic motifs’ (*ibid.*, 113-115). For example, in *Toward an Ecological Society* (1980), Murray Bookshin has posited that the previous harmony between humans and nature, an organic society in which people participated in various natural cycles, was broken up and gave birth to hierarchical and, ultimately, classed societies, leading to the present state of crisis. A redemptive struggle, therefore, becomes a return to an organic society with smaller-scale agricultural production, or, for some deep ecologists, even to the time before the Neolithic revolution and agriculture, when humans were hunters and gathers and were a ‘real’ part of the wilderness (Mukta and Hardiman 2000; Bonnett 2016). In this register, as Jeremy Davis has advocated in his articulation of the notion of the ‘nostalgia of sustainability’, ‘nostalgic imaginings are not, then, just a regulative ideal for ecological praxis. Nostalgia is called upon as an ethical principle’ (2010, 262).

In the view of Mukta and Hardiman, however, these ecological nostalgic arguments run the risk of ‘tip[ping] over into a celebration of a mythical past’ and often ‘depend for their force on a contrast of between a degenerate modern Western civilisation and its “Other”—which is seen in a historical past or a timeless past-in-present’ (2000, 120; 123). Taking the example of forestry preservation and destruction in traditional Indian society as a clash of disputed history, Mukta and Hardiman note the long history of forestry destruction before Western civilisation was introduced. Nostalgic ecological thinking nonetheless prefers a depiction of an ‘essentialised and idealised’ organic society as a past Eden, ignoring historical evidence as well as the fact that this peasant society was also highly class based and patriarchal. According to Mukta and Hardiman, this resonates with what they have described as ‘reversed Orientalism’, that is, ‘the traits of a supposedly degenerate “Oriental mentality”—e.g., spirituality, religiosity, closeness to nature’ that is similar to the use of a “primitive” Other, now valorised in this construction of the virtues of ecological sustainability’ from critics of modern society (*ibid.*, 120).

This research takes Mukta and Hardiman’s warning seriously in analysing how nostalgic imaginaries of the environment are deployed and presented in the Tzu-chi setting. However, the study attempts to advance and complicate our understanding of how this essentialised nostalgic ecological view works ‘on the ground’. The effort is two-fold. First, the idea of ‘reversed Orientalism’ is particularly revealing when examining how Buddhism becomes tinged with environmentalism in both the fields of religious practice and academia, an issue that Chapter Seven explores. Nevertheless, while Mukta and Hardiman stop at the point of identifying this ‘problematic’ tendency, as if it entailed a ‘second round’ of ‘othering’ and exploiting non-Western civilisation for the purpose of finding an alternative solution to modern capitalist progress, this dissertation asks how this tendency is in turn used by ‘the other’, ‘the Oriental’, for their own political agenda: the development of a local identity, for example, and particularly in the case of Tzu-chi, of religion. Second, without denying the essentialist and idealist approach which can be found in ecological nostalgia, this research recognises an underlying paradox of Mukta and Hardiman’s critical view of it; that is, that the view itself is an essentialist one. In articulating the issues of nostalgic ecological theory, the problematic remembrances of the environmental past the scholars use are those of a distant past and are associated with an organic society far removed from industrial modernisation. In those scenarios, the ecological past from afar thus appears in the form of a ‘memory-image’, with ‘pre-fabricated’

representations with only a 'single plot of story'; it resonates with Boym's 'restorative nostalgia' typology, which sees itself 'as truth and tradition' rather than nostalgia (2007, 13-14). An emerging question, then, concerns the kind of ecological nostalgia derived from the memory of the environment from a proximate past, one that a person once experienced and lost within his or her lifetime. In this kind of ecological nostalgia, the experiences of and in the environment are closely linked to subjectivity and reside in the understanding of one's body, senses, social relations, and worldviews. As the following chapters demonstrate, in the case of Taiwan, where a transition from an agricultural society to a highly technological one occurred within less than a half century, the remembrance of a society's relation to nature in the context of a peasant society is not through images of 'old tales' but a lived past. Thus, rather than simply exploring the problems of utopian restoration in ecological nostalgia, the aim here is an endeavour to expand the focus to the entanglement and multiplicity between the environmental movement and the homesick yearning for the remembered experiences of and relationship with nature. It explores what ecological nostalgia tells us about a sense of belonging in the complexities of a temporal and spatial rupture and continuum, as well as examining what happens when the 'imagined tradition' of idealist and essentialist ecological nostalgia encounters 'realistic' and 'contingent' age-old customs in everyday life settings.

The environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht's notion of *solastalgia* and its related discussions are useful in addressing these questions in the following chapters. Albrecht proposed solastalgia as a concept to understand the connection between environmental changes and human distress. He explains that solastalgia, which resonates with the characteristics of nostalgia, is a form of place pathology, 'the pain or sickness caused by the loss or lack of solace and the sense of isolation connected to the present state of one's home and territory' (2005, 44-5). Drawing on Mitchell's (1946, 4) observation that, 'divorced from his roots, man [sic] loses his psychic stability', and through his analysis of environmental change in the Hunter Valley and drought-affected areas in South Australia, Albrecht argues that the most poignant moments of solastalgia occur when one experiences the sense of homeless while still at home. He contends: 'It [solastalgia] is when there is a recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault (physical desolation). It is manifest in an attack on one's sense of place, in the erosion of the sense of belonging (identity) to a particular place and a feeling of distress (psychological desolation) about its transformation' (2005, 45). The concept of nostalgia is particularly central to

Albrecht's theory as a 'ghost reference' (*ibid.*). However, according to Albrecht, in contrast to the 'dislocated spatial and temporal dimension of nostalgia', solastalgia is 'not about looking back to some golden past'; thus, those who suffer from it might actively 'engage in collective action that provides solace and communion in any given environment' (*ibid.*, 44-5). A number of studies have adapted the concept of solastalgia. For Askland and Bunn (2018), because of its diagnostic quality, the concept develops into a measurable proof of mental illness to identify environmentally induced distress. Subsequently, as a technical term, the concept gains the specific intent of political intervention and has the possibility of being legitimated and requiring greater institutional intervention by entering political discourse.

If solastalgia is a morph of nostalgia, then Albrecht's theory of place-based distress moves the concept of nostalgia from a temporal orientation (back) to a spatial one. However, according to Askland and Bunn, to better understand the phenomenological basis of place-based distress, the focus needs to extend beyond the transformation or degradation of the local environment and link its spatial, or 'placial', dimension to that of temporality: 'Not just the scars on the physical and social landscapes that underpin this experience', Askland and Bunn argue, 'but also a temporal rupture, manifesting as dissonance between past experiences, present realities, and future ideas of sociality and sense of self in place' (2018, 18). Drawing on Connor and Marshall (2016), Askland and Bunn propose that solastalgia emerges in the nexus between the bio-physical world, social networks, and meanings, and 'it is through the continuous dialogue between the three that the premises for human-nature relationship are established' (*ibid.*, 20). Based on their research in a historical village in Australia that is surrounded by open-cut mines, Askland and Bunn contend that solastalgia is not only a form of mental distress but an ontological anxiety because it is a trauma of losing a sense of *the* place where human beings find the strongest sense of ontological security: home. Askland and Bunn have explained that what 'home' indicates is beyond domestic design and practice; it is a concept which encapsulates the bodily experience of place through a temporal narrative of continuity, and 'it is both a place and a state' of familiarity and predictability. Accordingly, home is a temporal construct. Home, the place for which nostalgia yearns, is established in relation to and through the past present, and at the same time, it is embedded in the fabrics of social relation and materialised in habitual practice and embodied knowledge. Askland and Bunn thus conclude that the notion of solastalgia, the ontological anxiety caused

by environmental changes, concerns 'the disruption and distress caused by dissonance in temporal as in spatial terms' (*ibid.*, 21).

### 3. Concluding Remarks

The overriding purpose of this study is to explore the sociological and cultural implications of waste recycling to ask how the waste practice of recycling transform values in addition to those of discarded materials. For its empirical focus, it examines the case of Tzu-chi recycling in post-authoritarian, contemporary Taiwan. As a point of departure, this research first adopts a 'background theory novelty' by drawing on the literature of waste studies, which scholarly examinations of waste have recently developed. As Chapter Two shows, the scholarship in waste studies shows a paradigm shift, looking beyond the conventional wisdom that positions waste as an environmental and social problem that needs an instrumental and scientific solution. Instead, this dissertation is in line with the effort to formulate a new relationship between society and waste based on the view that waste is a constitutive element and reflects the terrain of modern society; further, as a practice, it is a process of self-making. From there, the dissertation establishes its research objective of exploring how the remaking of waste recycling (re)makes Taiwanese society. However, the fact that 'observations are theory-laden does not mean that they are theory-determined' (George and Bennett 2005, 20-21). Rather simply drawing insights from scholarly literature on waste studies, this thesis uses Tzu-chi's case to reflect on the theoretical division between material agency and the contextual symbols of waste by examining the unique meaning associations and operational mechanisms of Tzu-chi recycling. With this effort in mind, the review of waste literature explores waste material's capacity to embody meanings and temporalities, making it a conceptual category, a metaphor which can imply something beyond a material object. Based on this conceptual proposition, this dissertation examines what 'discarded waste' *other than waste objects* Tzu-chi recycling recycles. In reviewing theoretical orientations towards waste recycling, the chapter addresses a key aspect of the concept of recycling: value transformation, bouncing in between value and void, end and origin. Furthermore, the review highlights the scholarly account of the recycling rhetoric, which is often tinged with redemption through restoration, and an articulation of the temporal mixture. Recognising this tendency, this dissertation thus articulates a conceptual imagination of the relation between recycling and nostalgia when analysing Tzu-chi recycling. With its review of the concepts and debates in the

literature on nostalgia, this chapter clarifies numerous aspects scholars have identified in their conceptualisations of it. These occur through spatial and temporal terms and restorative and prospective orientations, and they are intertwined with modernity and the changes it entails. These aspects provide theoretical tools that are helpful in approaching the empirical materials collected through fieldwork. Drawing on these concepts, the chapters which follow consider how the sentimental yearning for a sense of belonging occurs in Tzu-chi's recycling movement.

