



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

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

Dung, Y.A.

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>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3209240>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3209240> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

Author: Dung, Y.A.

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

Issue Date: 2021-09-08

Chapter Four | The Disposable and Recyclable Labour

1. Moving Beyond Beliefs

Chapter Three has explained that, in Tzu-chi recycling, all the people involved are volunteers, except the seven members of the environmental team at the headquarters, who are hired employees. It also has illustrated that discarded materials travel through a chain of Tzu-chi recycling sites, where Tzu-chi recycling volunteers, commissioned or not, conduct a variety of recycling works. However, at this point, the daily work of recycling, the individual volunteers, and their motivations are not yet clear. In this and the next chapter, Chapters Four and Five, the discussion brings Tzu-chi volunteers and their recycling labour to the centre of the investigation. Both chapters grapple with four primary questions: what are the waste works, who are the volunteers, why do they volunteer, and what is their relationship with recycling work?

While weaving together descriptions of how the volunteers perform the work of sorting, cleaning, dismantling, packing, and storing waste materials, this chapter particularly contextualises the investigation in Taiwan's industrial development in the second half of the 20th century. By examining the characteristics of recycling labour and the ways the community volunteers experience and understand their recycling involvement, this chapter reveals that, in contrast to the prevailing wisdom on these voluntary engagements as a form of religious

devotion, the people and labour found inside Tzu-chi recycling stations read Taiwanese industrialisation and modernisation through the lens of its social and economic costs and consequences.

Regarding the four questions proposed in this and the next chapter, scholars who have studied Tzu-chi recycling have thus far rarely investigated the questions of 'who' and 'what.' Some studies, both in sociology and in the field of (religious) voluntarism and citizen participation, however, have explored the question of 'why'. Most have highlighted the salient role of value systems in galvanising the volunteers, and they have proposed different theories to conceptualise the influence of the ideas, symbols, and rituals embedded in Tzu-chi recycling practices.

Three principal lines of thought are identified in the existing research. First, scholars have argued that the volunteers' recycling engagement is a direct result of rising environmental awareness (Ho 2003; 2016; Lee and Han 2015; Chen 2017). The second and foremost line of thought emphasises the role of religiosity. Studies with this approach often argue that the volunteers are inspired by the organisational leader Cheng-yen's transcendent interpretations of environmental issues. They have internalised the message and are thus interpellated into the discourse and practice of viewing recycling as a spiritual cultivation to realise Buddhist altruism and to build a Pure Land (Chang 1996; Chiu 2000; Wu 2010; Chau 2013; Her 2014). Third, some scholars maintain that Tzu-chi's environmental and religious discourses indicate a modality for the volunteers to perform traditional rules of conduct, a personal-cultivational modality of doing good. For Lin (1999) and Clippard (2012), this is exemplified by the organisational narrative of describing recycling as a practice of 'knowing *fu*, cherishing *fu*, and making *fu*' (知福、惜福、造福⁸⁹). As a traditional concept, *fu* (福), on the one hand, implies a blessed status in which one is at one with all necessary resources. Therefore, recycling as 'knowing *fu*' and 'cherishing *fu*' is an expression of showing appreciation of and preserving resources at both the spiritual and the material levels. This is morally appealing to volunteers (Lin 1999, 200). On the other hand, the concept of *fu* is also equivalent to individualistic spiritual capital earned by doing good. Within this conceptual framework, being altruistic is conceived of as self-interested behaviour to accumulate religious credit, as a way of *zuo gongde* (做功德), generating karmic merits. In this regard, by engaging in the dirty, energy-consuming work of recycling, volunteers assume

⁸⁹ zhi fu, xi fu, zao fu

they will receive their reward, either a purely moral one or possible material benefits received within this lifetime or beyond. Such considerations resonate with the instrumental motives suggested by the exchange theory, in which volunteering is a rational choice people make through weighting the costs and benefits (Stebbins 1994; Wilson 2000).

In short, according to the literature, as well as the analysis this dissertation develops concerning organisational discourse (see Chapter Seven and Eight), the entwined moral values embodied in the practice of recycling provide cultural resources to attract the public to volunteer for Tzu-chi recycling, regardless of self-interest or altruism, environmentalism, religion, or traditional motives. The work-like activity of dealing with rubbish, in this account, is what Adam Y. Chau has described as ‘an ensemble of mechanisms through which the practitioner crafts and fashions him or herself in the image of some kind of ideal figure’ (2013, 79). Moreover, some research mentions aspects of social networking and solidarity benefits in Tzu-chi recycling which yield positive mental effects. These also draw people into volunteering (Wu 2010; Chu 2012; Her 2014; Chen 2017). However, contributions that refer to somewhat sociological aspects of Tzu-chi recycling usually do so in the form of factors that complement the religious and organisational ideology, and they rarely address the volunteers’ socioeconomic characteristics in a direct manner.

In other words, our current understanding of why people engage in Tzu-chi recycling is dominated by an assertion emphasising ideological impetus and institutional discourse. In this account, the volunteer individuals are seen as religious practitioners or Tzu-chi’s organisational followers, not as people who voluntarily engage in waste works. The current understanding not only overlooks the sociological background of volunteering as well as the ‘contents’ of the chosen task of recycling, but it also rarely acknowledges different ‘types’ of volunteers in Tzu-chi recycling. The commissioned volunteers wearing blue uniforms, the non-commissioned but certified volunteers wearing grey uniforms, and the non-commissioned and non-certified walk-in volunteers without uniforms are categorised under a ‘catch-all’ term: Tzu-chi recycling volunteer.⁹⁰ While treating the nature of volunteering as a multi-dimensional reality is indispensable, volunteers’ different associative relationships with the organisation reflect the

⁹⁰ See Chapter One for further discussion of the different types of Tzu-chi recycling volunteers and the requirements to become a commissioner and certified environmental volunteer.

different meanings they attribute to volunteering and its related work. This assumption is manifested in the observation during my fieldwork that the majority of the Tzu-chi recycling volunteers, particularly the non-commissioned ones, do not volunteer in any Tzu-chi activities other than recycling. In contrast, the commissioners I encountered at the recycling sites often participate in a variety of Tzu-chi charitable projects, volunteering in hospitals or at schools, for example, and they are often members of multiple Tzu-chi local sub-units.

If, as previous research suggests, volunteers are motivated by religious and traditional values of altruism, why do they limit their philanthropic involvement to the task of recycling only? It is more likely that the picture scholars have so far depicted of Tzu-chi recycling volunteers is largely based on the image of Tzu-chi commissioners. To my knowledge, the non-commissioned community volunteers actually comprise a large portion of the labour force of Tzu-chi recycling, but they have nevertheless been left out of the analysis.⁹¹

The non-commissioned volunteers' almost exclusive choice of recycling as *the* volunteering work in which they participate reflects another structural context of Tzu-chi recycling that previous research has overlooked: that is, that a different type of volunteering participation emerged throughout Tzu-chi's communitisation movement. As Chapter Six discusses in detail, the Tzu-chi communitisation movement was an organisational restructuring effort the Tzu-chi organisation advanced in the 1990s and 2000s to stimulate people from many walks of life to participate in a variety of missionary activities the Buddhist organisation has developed. Chiu (2000) has argued that the participatory mode of this new group of community volunteers, including those who engage in recycling works, diminished the role of life-long-commitment and religious identification. These volunteers have a more temporary commitment, focusing on programme-based tasks rather than the organisational ideologies. This stands in

⁹¹ To a large extent, the fragmented view probably originates from the methodological approach scholars have taken. The researchers mentioned earlier mostly depended on the methods of discourse and literature analysis, using organisational documents and publications as their primary sources, in which the institutional and religious perspective is most apparent. Although some studies do incorporate ethnography and interviews with volunteers in the research design (for instance, Chang 1996; Chiu 2000; Wu 2010), the respondents who appear in the analysis are still mostly the commissioners. I, too, experienced a similar tendency during my fieldwork. Particularly during the first few site visits, it was always the commissioners, often the station chief or media production sub-unit volunteer, who served as representatives to receive my questions and give introductory tours. It was only through a longer period of participant observations that I learned the differences in volunteers' associations with the organisation and their views on recycling volunteering.

contrast to Tzu-chi's 'traditional' volunteers, who were mostly religious housewives, and the social professional elites who joined Tzu-chi in its earlier institutionalisation process (*ibid.*, 155). The transition Chiu has observed in the nature of Tzu-chi volunteering to an extent echoes a shift in the level of individual commitment to civil society and the affiliation with faith-based organisation that international scholars have noted. The observed tendency is one of an increasingly 'loose connection' between volunteer and organisation, and a shift from 'other-' to 'self-oriented' types of volunteering (Putman 2000; Hustinx and Lammertyn 2003; Wuthnow 2006).

It is important to note that the issue in this chapter is not proposing a replacement of commissioned volunteers' motivations and views with those of the non-commissioned ones, nor to create a contrast between the two groups. In fact, on various occasions throughout my fieldwork, I made similar observations to those of previous researchers, noting that the volunteers who undertake recycling, not only commissioners but also, sometimes, non-commissioners, articulated religious, traditional, and environmental attitudes when explaining their volunteering motives. Chapters Seven and Eight discuss those scenarios. Nevertheless, in this and the following chapter, I wish to draw more attention to the non-commissioned volunteers, although not exclusively, to highlight the multi-layered nature of Tzu-chi recycling volunteers and the sociological significance of their volunteering.

Regarding the four research questions raised in the beginning of the chapter, to investigate why individuals volunteer, particularly those like the Tzu-chi non-commissioned recycling volunteers who volunteer on a sporadic, specific-task basis, it is imperative to incorporate the latent connections between subjective motivation and volunteers' social-structural embeddedness. In other words, the answers to why they volunteer are a component of the questions, 'What are the works?', 'Who are they?', and 'What is their relationship to the task?' with reference to broader historical foundations and sociological preconditions. From the point of view of this type of inquiry, this and the next chapter study Tzu-chi recycling volunteers by focusing on the contents and characteristics of recycling labour. Each of the two chapters represents a different angle. While Chapter Five is mainly a personal, living experience account, this chapter has an economic structural perspective. The remainder of this chapter consists of two parts. The first provides a general description of recycling labour and individual volunteers. It first highlights how recycling in Tzu-chi is repetitive, meticulous, and sometimes explorative work. It then tells stories of the volunteers and their

participation in Tzu-chi recycling. In the second part, the discussion moves to the transitions of Taiwan's industrial modernisation and shows who and what was considered useful/useless and valuable/valueless throughout the economic development process. The chapter thus argues that Tzu-chi recycling volunteers are the once 'disposed of' and now 'recycled' labour, along with Taiwanese industrial development.

2. Recycling Labours and Individuals

2.1 The Labour of 'Unmaking'

Compared to most recycling collection businesses I visited, the amount of time and physical effort Tzu-chi volunteers invest in their recycling work is remarkable. Despite variations in the classification systems in different Tzu-chi recycling stations, overall, the recycling work is episodic and miscellaneous. In addition, it involves a repetitive series of 'unmaking' processes, the deconstructive work of separating, removing, breaking, and dismantling, material by material, item by item.

At the stations, vehicles featuring the Tzu-chi logo pull up to the entrance to unload the recycling materials collected from the site's neighbourhood region. Volunteers near the entrance take batches and proficiently perform an initial division by placing the discarded items into several large plastic baskets: one for paper, one for PET bottles, one for plastic containers, one for household appliances, and so on. After the first round of separation, the filled baskets are delivered to the individual working areas for further separation.

In the paper recycling area, some volunteers tear out book pages by hand; some pick commercial flyers and papers coated with a layer of plastic film by testing how easily they can be torn apart piece by piece. The sorted papers are sent to other volunteers for further processing; volunteers cut blank white paper from the parts tainted with ink so that they can separate it from the rest. The repetitive tasks can sometimes become a reflex. For instance, once, an elderly volunteer 'accidentally' recycled a consent document that was intended for her to sign. In between the conversations with the television crew, who gave the volunteer the document, the volunteer began to cut out the blank white part of it as she held it.

Similar meticulous work also takes place in the plastic recycling areas. On one side, the volunteers work on discarded PET⁹² plastic bottles. The process begins with emptying out and rinsing the bottles before the plastic labels, caps, and the remaining ring are removed using a curved blade or a cutting machine designed by Tzu-chi volunteers. The processed bottles are further sorted by colour—transparent, green, and other—before they are transported to and stored at the larger stations for the Da-ai technology company’s contracted wholesalers to collect them and manufacture them into a variety of ‘green’ products.



Figure 4.1 Reference sample board of Tzu-chi plastic packaging material classification (photo by the author, 2016)

⁹² Polyethylene terephthalate is one of the most widely used plastic materials in making fibres for clothing, containers for liquids and foods, and in the manufacturing process as a whole.

On the other side of the plastic area, a reference board with information on 12 plastic packaging materials with corresponding product samples hangs on the wall (Figure 4.1). During my first few weeks working in the plastic bag recycling area, my task was to learn to recognise the recyclable items made of high-density polyethylene (HDPE), low-density polyethylene (LDPE), polypropylene (PP), polystyrene (PS) and polyvinyl chloride (PVC). After initial product classification, volunteers in the plastic bag area further work on colour-sorting by removing stickers and labels, or by cutting the coloured parts from the transparent film. At some large sites, volunteers operated a vacuum machine, designed by both Tzu-chi and the National Industrial Technology Research Institute, to compress the air-filled materials for convenient storage and transportation.

Inside the dismantling zone, miscellaneous objects—ranging from household appliances to toys, from helmets to cassettes—are taken apart. In contrast to the plastic, paper, and general classification areas where the atmosphere is often lively and bustling, the dismantling area in all the Tzu-chi recycling stations breathes a quiet and concentrated atmosphere, where the sounds of hammering and metal clicking are sometimes mixed with the background music of Buddhist songs playing from an audio station. From time to time, motionless volunteers staring at the recycled items in their hands make a sharp contrast with their fellows hammering objects. Tzu-chi volunteers describe the dismantling labour in Taiwanese Hokkien as a ‘real thick job’ (真厚工⁹³), as it demands not only time but also both physical and mindful work.⁹⁴ It could take one volunteer more than three mornings to disassemble a total of 40 helmets. Some volunteers are in charge of breaking down video home system (VHS) and cassette tapes by separating magnetic tape from plastic shells and metal screws. Once, I observed a volunteer spend 25 minutes studying and taking a blender apart by using two hammers, one pair of pliers, a screwdriver, and a magnet to separate the blade parts into two plastic items, one iron component, and one copper component.

⁹³ tsin kāu-kang

⁹⁴ Interview with a Tzu-chi recycling volunteer at the dismantling area of the Kaohsiung Sanmin station (November 08, 2014).

2.2 Stories of Shen, Mei, and Chu

Why do the volunteers want to invest so much time, labour, and energy in the dirty, demanding, sometimes dangerous, and generally stigmatised work of recycling? It should be noted that, although the volunteers commonly perform tasks delegated to them by senior volunteers, doing this work meticulously is self-directed. For example, the Tzu-chi volunteers' commitment to detailed tasks once led to a disagreement between the then-station chief and the volunteers in the Bade recycling station in Taipei. The station chief asked the packaging recycling volunteers to skip cutting labels and sorting by colour and put all packaging materials together in order to empty the storage space for site relocation. After the chief left the room, the volunteers nevertheless performed these tasks for some time. After following the instruction unwillingly, Mei, one of the volunteers, murmured in Taiwanese Hokkien that 'this [detailed classification] is what [we are] willing to do⁹⁵' and 'such a pity (拍損⁹⁶)' several times.⁹⁷

Based on the interviews and participant observation, a general impression emerged that, in the eyes of the volunteers, recycling has the same function as leisure or sport. The volunteers, commissioned or not, sometimes describe the activity as 'invigorating', 'to exercise muscles and bones', 'to activate the brain so it doesn't *shrink*', or 'to lose weight', and sometimes as 'killing time', 'a reason to go outside of the house', or 'working and chatting with friends'. The best way to further examine and contextualise this view is with reference to ethnographic vignettes. During my fieldwork, I spent the most time with three volunteers—Shen, Mei, and Chu—in the plastic packaging recycling room in the Bade station in Taipei during 2016. In the following section, I tell brief stories of the three volunteers, describing who they are and their participation in Tzu-chi recycling.

Ms. Shen, 69 years old, former construction worker

When I asked Shen, a then-69-year-old female volunteer, the reason she volunteered with Tzu-chi recycling on a daily basis, her first response was, 'It's easier and faster to pass the days when you have work to do'. Shen is a former construction worker. Nine years ago, one day after her retirement, she walked into the Tzu-chi community location near her house to ask about volunteering. 'I

⁹⁵ 「這就是欲做的事」 ('tse tiō sī bueh tsò ê tai-tsi'), in Taiwanese Hokkien, the word *bueh* (willing) can denote either 'want' or 'should'.

⁹⁶ phah-sng

⁹⁷ Personal communication, four Tzu-chi recycling volunteers at the Taipei Bade station, including Chu, Shen, and Mei (21 May 2016).

couldn't just sit at home and stare at the television. It drives me crazy. Being here is good. You work, you talk, and then the day passes by'. Shen is the quiet one in the plastic recycling room. I asked if she was ever bored by the mindlessly repetitive movements or repelled by the sometimes dirty work of recycling. Shen responded that she would be 'feeling uncomfortable' if she were doing nothing and commented, 'The more I do, the happier I am'.⁹⁸ A week before my volunteering at the Bade station began, the site was closed temporarily for about two weeks. In order to 'fill the gaps', Shen went hiking every morning for a week. Soon, she found herself visiting other Tzu-chi recycling stations to ask for work to do. Despite her commitment, however, Shen showed no interest in any Tzu-chi activity other than recycling, whether it was guiding tours to visit different environment-related sites, religious assemblies, or volunteer training events. Although Shen was a certified community volunteer of Tzu-chi recycling, I never saw her wearing the grey uniform at the site. Describing herself as a 'simple volunteer', Shen maintained that the substantial degree of choice—no obligation to work specific shifts and the power to terminate the involvement with relative ease—was better than being a commissioner, despite its seeming prestige.

Ms. Mei, 72 years old, former breakfast shop worker

Mei, a 72-year-old woman at the time, had come to Tzu-chi recycling at the encouragement of an old customer of hers. Mei was a former breakfast shop worker, and the customer was a Tzu-chi senior commissioner. Mei began her Tzu-chi involvement two years ago when her sons hired a Filipino caretaker to look after her chronically ill husband. Despite her junior standing in Tzu-chi recycling, Mei was one of the most active figures at the station and in the plastic recycling room. Other volunteers told me in an impressed tone that Mei could sort more than 1,000 PET bottles a day before she came to the plastic packaging room. Mei was often the one who assigned everyone's tasks, led the group conversation, and supervised a new-comer's learning process. When other nearby recycling stations were short of specialised plastic packaging volunteers, Mei adjusted her 'shifts' to 'work' extra and help out. In contrast to Shen, Mei liked to participate in different kinds of Tzu-chi activities organised for the non-commissioned recycling volunteers. While sharing the stories of her trip to Tzu-chi's largest environmental educational station and to a water purification factory, Mei

⁹⁸ Interview with Tzu-chi recycling volunteer Shen at the Taipei Bade station (14 May 2016).

described the experience in Taiwanese Hokkien, describing it as learning ‘how many kilos the outside world weighs’.⁹⁹

Ms. Chu, 73 years old, former restaurant cleaner

Seventy-three-year-old housewife Chu shared Mei’s motivation to have her ‘own thing outside the house’. Chu told me that she came to Tzu-chi to volunteer out of boredom. At the time, she sought work to do when she realised her children were all grown; one of her three sons left for the United States for his career, taking two of her grandchildren with him, whom she had raised. One day, Chu saw Tzu-chi commissioners ‘wearing that beautiful cheongsam uniform walking down on the street’. Her admiration drove her to participate in Tzu-chi volunteering.¹⁰⁰ Over her 13-year participation in Tzu-chi, however, Chu did not become a commissioner, nor did she receive her cheongsam uniform. Instead, she had a grey-and-white Tzu-chi working uniform. The conditions of becoming a commissioner—which require participating in a variety of organisational philanthropic activities and trainings—were harder to meet in Chu’s situation. Chu’s husband was not particularly supportive of her volunteering work in Tzu-chi, and his disagreement became stronger after Tzu-chi’s public crisis in 2014. Despite her husband’s rejection, Chu insisted on continuing, but she reduced her involvement in Tzu-chi recycling from every day to three to four times a week. Chu usually came to the recycling station while her husband was at work, and she came with an extra change of clothes, to ‘hide’ the evidence of her recycling labour—her sweat and the trashy smell. ‘I told him it’s my business’, Chu said with a sour undertone. Noticing that Chu sometimes deployed distancing language when talking of her home as ‘that house’, I asked if she felt that her home was a place of work. Facing my rather direct question, Chu replied that the nature of recycling—sorting, organising, and being surrounded by ‘good people’—gave her peace of mind.¹⁰¹ Speaking of her adoration of recycling work, Chu explained that, due to her previous jobs working as a cleaner in a mall and at restaurants, she was not afraid of dirt or waste.

3. Being Productive and Being Recycled

Despite the differences between Shen, Mei, and Chu’s volunteering experience in Tzu-chi and their attitudes towards their relationship with the organisation, their

⁹⁹ Interview with Tzu-chi recycling volunteer Mei at the Taipei Bade station (21 May 2016).

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Tzu-chi recycling volunteer Chu at the Taipei Bade station (13 May 2016).

¹⁰¹ Interview with Tzu-chi recycling volunteer Chu at the Taipei Bade station (21 May 2016).

similarities can be described as rooted in a number of identities. They are non-commissioned but certified recycling volunteers. They are elderly, female, retired individuals with a shared previous life experience of being an ‘atypical worker’. Following the descriptions of Taiwanese atypical employment that Lin et al. (2011) and Chen and Shi (2012) have discussed, I use the term ‘atypical worker’ to refer to those ‘non-standard’ workers who engage in part-time, temporary contractual, or dispatchment-type manual jobs and transitional employment, excluding the self-employed.

The shared traits of Shen, Mei, and Chu shed light on the structural context of Tzu-chi recycling volunteering. In essence, the majority of Tzu-chi recycling volunteers are elderly women. According to the official environmental volunteer survey Tzu-chi conducted in 2011, of a total 33,537 non-commissioned but certified recycling volunteers, 80% are female.¹⁰² The age range of Tzu-chi recycling volunteers is related to their status of retirement. Shen, Mei, and Chu only began to consider volunteering when their previous jobs ended, be it construction work, breakfast shop work, or taking care of a husband, children, and grandchildren. Once, in a group conversation, Mei referred to the fellow volunteers as ‘classmates’, implying that they were all there to learn new things. Chu corrected Mei, saying they were colleagues instead. The volunteers in the room all found Chu’s suggestion more appropriate.¹⁰³

The practice of volunteering, in this account, is a replacement for work, done for the sake of keeping busy and active. A negative description associated with retirement and being elderly in the Tzu-chi lexicon, to which recycling volunteers sometimes refer, clearly articulates this account: *san deng gongmin* (三等公民). The term translates as ‘third-class citizens’, but it is used as a double entendre in the Tzu-chi context and becomes a ‘citizen of threefold waiting’, referring to a person who waits to eat, to sleep, and to die.¹⁰⁴ The term denotes an animal-like way of living and reveals the role of work in the volunteers’ self-conception: life without work decreases in value and is not worth living.

¹⁰² Tzu-chi Foundation, ‘2018 ciji huanbao tongji (xiu)’ 慈濟環保統計(修; unpublished document, 17 September 2019), PowerPoint file.

¹⁰³ Group conversation with volunteers of the plastic packaging area at the Taipei Bade station (12 July 2016).

¹⁰⁴ For example, see: Li Wei-huang 李委煌, ‘Meiyou shijian qu langfei’ 沒有時間去浪費, *Ciji Yuekan* 慈濟月刊 [Ciji Monthly] 607, 25 June 2017, <http://web.tzuchiculture.org.tw/?book=607&mp=6455#.Xald1yVS924> (accessed on 17 September 2019).

The volunteers, Shen, Mei, and Chu as well as others, discuss their discomfort about the emptiness and dullness found in the life phase of retirement. This ‘boredom’, as Chu described it, underpins their motivation to volunteer in the first place. In sociology scholarship, boredom is often associated with the performance of monotonous activity that can ‘begin or stop at any time and is not immersed in a cohesive and organic temporal flow’, which is a work type associated with industrialised manufacturing (Gardiner 2012, 46). In this regard, like Sisyphus’s punishment, boredom is considered to derive from endless, linear repetition (Barbalet 1999). However, even though the features that scholars have proposed trigger a sense of boredom are almost identical to the characteristics of recycling work in Tzu-chi, the volunteers choose the same work as a *solution* to their ‘boredom’. Thus, Chu’s sense of boredom and emptiness, or the ‘uncomfortable’ feeling in Shen’s words, is not so much an emotion derived from repetitiveness, but rather ‘an estrangement from the formerly stable moral and socio-cultural foundations of acting and thinking’ (Gardiner 2012, 42-3). A source of boredom for the volunteers lies not in the absence of vital interest or meaning in the activity itself, but in the absence of the activities that render a familiar, sound life purpose—that is, being productive.

This affirmation of labour for its own sake and seeing work as a personal duty and source of meaning in the eyes of recycling volunteers clarifies how individuals associate their ‘usefulness’ with productivity and the relationship the volunteers have with the recycling tasks. People not only work for their livelihood, but they also invest personal time in work, producing a ‘self’ through working and relating to life and the world through work. Shen’s comment, ‘The more I do, the happier I am’, anchors the paradoxical connection between work and the notion of happiness Daniel Just has noted when discussing the pivotal status of work in the modern era. Just writes that, ‘as [a] temporary renunciation of happiness, modern work becomes a substitute for happiness, and ultimately its main source’ (2014, 436).

So far, I have described the content and characteristics of Tzu-chi recycling works and the recycling volunteers. To further understand why the volunteers share a work ethic and take it to heart, as well as their relationship with the chosen task of recycling as a practice to realise this attitude towards life, those aspects must be contextualised in the concrete social context and historical account of Taiwan’s economic transformation.

The following section recounts the drastic and rapid industrial development of Taiwan. The changes took place particularly between the 1960s and the 1980s, the period when the majority of Tzu-chi recycling volunteers, including Shen, Mei, and Chu, were in their 20s to 40s. In the earlier part of this period, Taiwan experienced a rapid industrial modernisation and the development of an export-led economy. People on the island were systematically and strategically mobilised and turned into human resources to produce a great variety of consumer goods. However, as the following section illuminates, when the national industry shifted from manufacturing towards the tertiary sector of service and high-tech industry, the once-utilised labour and skills became unwanted. As a result, middle-aged labourers, women in particular, entered a labour market of atypical jobs, just as Shen, Mei, and Chu did. This life experience manifests their later involvement in Tzu-chi recycling volunteering.

3.1 The Age of 'Making'

Over the past 60 years, Taiwan has experienced a fundamental transformation of its industrial structure, shifting from the post-war agrarian economy to a manufacturing industry and then to high-tech and service industries (Figure 4.2). The continuum of transition entailed a hyperactive 'making' period in which national industrial systems were in constant construction, producing a variety of objects and goods for export while people sought to usher in economic success.

Generally speaking, in the 1960s, the government used cheap labour and policy incentives to attract overseas capital and technologies and thus develop an active, export-oriented economy. By then, Taiwan had begun to participate in the global production market via its distinctive 'satellite factory system', a 'hierarchical subcontracting manufacturing system that consists of numerous small-scale, family-centred, and export-oriented factories' (Hsiung 1996, 1). Labour-intensive light industry activities such as textiles and umbrella and shoe manufacturing grew quickly; since then, the label 'made in Taiwan' has become globally recognised. In the 1970s, the government launched a national infrastructure building programme, the Ten Major Construction Projects, as a response to the 1973 oil crisis, leading to the development of heavy industry as well as building projects of numerous pieces of national infrastructure. Further, since the late 1980s, the high-tech and IT industry has risen to prominence under the auspices of the government, and, together with the services sector, took over from the traditional manufacturing economy (Chen and Shi 2012). In short, Taiwan has

experienced about three waves of drastic change in its national industry, from agriculture to high-tech industry, within three decades.

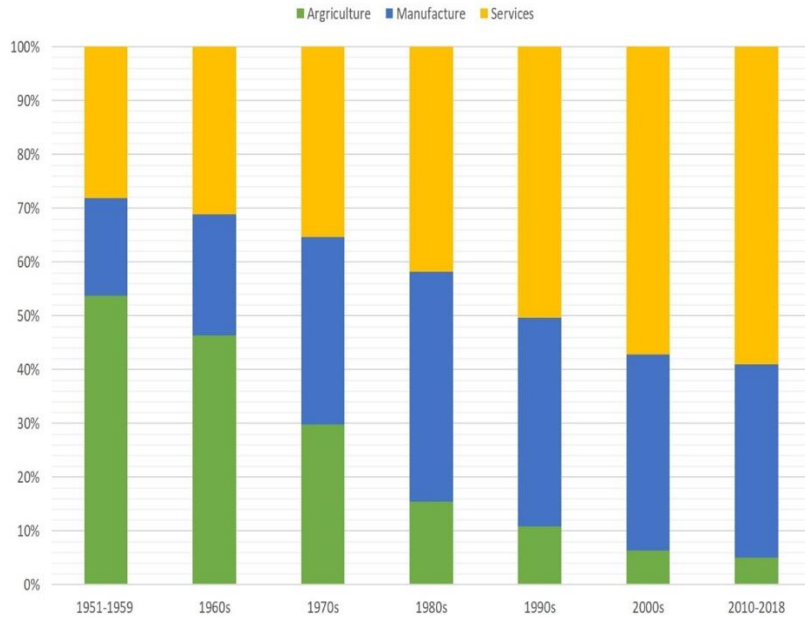


Figure 4.2 Industrial structure change, 1951-2018 (figure made by the author; data source: DGBAS, the Executive Yuan¹⁰⁵)

While Taiwan earns a place among the ‘Four Asian Tigers’ (Vogel 1991) and has developed an economic ‘miracle paradigm’ with a record 9% gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate average per annum between 1963 and 1996 (Lin, Thung-hong 2015), an emblematic popular song of the time, ‘Only Hard Work Ushers in Success’ (愛拚才會贏¹⁰⁶), could be heard in karaoke rooms and on the stages of all kinds of political campaigns.¹⁰⁷ The chorus lyrics of the 1980s Taiwanese Hokkien hit song are, ‘good luck, bad luck, always get back on your feet to work; one third is fate, two thirds is labour; only hard work ushers in

¹⁰⁵ Taiwanese Directorate General of Budget, Accounting, and Statistics. 2019. *DGBAS Data Repository: For Labour Force Data*. Taipei, Taiwan: https://win.dgbas.gov.tw/dgbas04/bc4/timeser/indu_f.asp.

¹⁰⁶ ai pin cai hui ying

¹⁰⁷ For example: Wu, Jia-yi and Zou Jing-wen 吳嘉億、鄒景雯, ‘Zongtong dao yingqu weilu chang ai pin caihui ying’ 總統到營區圍爐唱「愛拚才會贏, *Liberty Times*, 7 February 2008. <https://news.ltn.com.tw/news/politics/paper/187672>.

success'.¹⁰⁸ The song not only evokes an image of Taiwan's miraculous economic success made possible through people's hard work, but it also shows that success was considered achievable. At the time, there was a high growth rate resulting from rampant entrepreneurship, an employment rate of almost 100%, and an expanding middle class (Lee and Lin 2017). The belief was that earning success for the future was in one's control and was built upon one's hard labour. From this belief arises an affirmation of work as a life purpose, as well as virtues such as frugality and resilience, which in turn produced the dependable labour force necessary for a productive economic system.

The affirmation of work ethics is not only moulded in the grand project of state-building; it is also deeply intertwined with the family values in which patriarchy persists. In the 'satellite factory system', family-oriented small- and medium-sized companies dominated the economic landscape (Lim 2014). In the family-business setting, being productive for the company directly translated into being a dutiful family member, which often led to self-exploitation or exploitative mismanagement (Shieh 1992; Ke 1993; Liu et.al 2010). Numerous studies have highlighted how this was intertwined with gender roles. As industrialisation unfolded, the informal and formal female labour force participation rate increased along with the development of the satellite factory system. The gendered economic activities in which paid and unpaid women partook served as a means to support or complement their primary roles as wives, mothers, and daughters (Kao 1999).

For example, the state advocated a community development programme of 'Living Rooms as Factories' in the 1970s to promote home-based work and to increase the productivity of married women, in addition to the work of single women in the export industrial sectors. Shen, Mei, and Chu, among other Tzu-chi recycling volunteers, remember that movement. Women, including them, made and crafted all sorts of consumer goods by weaving bamboo baskets, assembling toys, patching up clothes, and boxing and packaging different goods at homes and communal areas. The volunteers recalled sitting in the corner of rooms or communal areas with family members or neighbours. Together, they worked on disparate tasks as temporary, additional jobs to 'make some extra money' or to

¹⁰⁸ 好運,歹運,總嘛要照起工來行; 三分天注定,七分靠拍拼;愛拼才會贏 (hó-ün, pháinn-ün, tsóng mā iau tsiau-khí-kang lâi kiánn; sann hun thinn tsù tīng, tshit hun khò tánn phing; ài phing tsiah-ē iánn)

help each other out when they would not finish the amount of subcontracted work from the factories during the peak season.¹⁰⁹

As a part of the subcontracting network of Taiwan's export-led economy, the 'Living Rooms as Factories' programme was developed by the state as a solution to one of the prime issues at the time: the labour shortage. According to Hsiung, the programme was a part of a larger project that was 'designed to bring the surplus labour [...] into productive work' after 'several national surveys were conducted to measure the extent and nature of surplus labour in various communities' (1996, 52). When the survey found many 'idle women' in the community, a variety of workshops, training activities, and support systems were launched to harvest this surplus labour force for needed production (*ibid.*).

In other words, when the entire nation was regulated and adjusted to the goal of becoming an economically more efficient and productive society, much as natural materials are turned into material resources, the entire population was turned into human resources under systematic measurements and strategic mobilisations. People who did not engage in the needed production of consumer goods, described as 'idle individuals', thus became morally wrong and economically 'wasteful'. To see Shen, Mei, and Chu's life experience against the socio-economic background of Taiwan, it is unsurprising that work became the primary purpose of their lives.

3.2 Recycling Disposable Labour

From the perspective of a developmental model, Taiwan's drastic economic structural change tells the story of success by upgrading the industry from agricultural to high-tech production within half a century. From another, less bright angle, it nevertheless tells the story of how the market economy can rapidly cast off industries, businesses, and the labour force. According to the Directorate-General of Budget, Accounting, and Statistics of Taiwan, between 1978 and 1994, the average unemployment rate was below 2%.¹¹⁰ When the high-tech industry and services economy rose to prominence in the 1990s, the unemployment rate began to rise, reaching two peaks in the early 2000s and by the end of the 2000s, with the number at 5%. Among those who did not have and could not find a job, the majority were those who had a job since the early 1980s, who accounted for

¹⁰⁹ Personal communication, four Tzu-chi recycling volunteers in Bade station, including Chu, Shen, and Mei (21 May 2016).

¹¹⁰ Data prior to 1978 is not available.

nearly 85% of unemployed Taiwanese by the early 2000s. In other words, instead of finding it difficult to enter the labour market, the challenge was to stay in the labour market. The percentage of unemployed former workers positively related to the portion of unemployment caused by 'business closure or shrinking'. In the 2000s, the percentage of employment caused by losing jobs surpassed the percentage of those who left their job because of dissatisfaction (Table 4.1).

Along with tertiarization, two additional economic structural transitions contribute to the labour market conditions described. The first is the decline of small- and medium-sized companies whose share of export value, according to Lin (2015), dropped from 76% to 18% since the early 1990s, to be replaced by monopolies, multinational enterprises, and automated production modes. The second structural change is the industrial offshoring that caused factories of small, labour-intensive light industries to begin large-scale relocation in the late 1980s, followed by large business groups of the information and communications technology (ICT) industry in the 2000s, primarily to China (Lin et. al 2011). This trend largely corresponds with structural unemployment caused by post-industrialisation seen on a global scale, which was further aggravated by the economic recession of 2001 and the financial crisis of 2008.

Table 4.1 Unemployment-related statistics, 1980-2018 (table made by the author; data source: DGBAS, the Executive Yuan¹¹¹)

Year	unemployment rate (% per thousand people)	first-time job-seeker	non-first-time job-seeker	reason of unemployment: business closure or shrinking ¹¹²	reason of unemployment: dissatisfaction with previous job
1978	1.67	55.63	44.37	7.33	21.72
1982	2.14	41.12	58.88	14.93	24.45
1986	2.66	34.67	65.33	18.64	28.11
1990	1.67	33.71	66.29	17.25	35.6
1994	1.56	30.06	69.94	13.52	40.37
1998	2.69	22.88	77.12	27.83	31.96
2002	5.17	15.65	84.35	48.11	21.26
2006	3.91	19.94	80.06	28.57	34.42
2010	5.21	18.13	81.87	41.57	24.57
2014	3.96	22.98	77.02	28	35.32
2018	3.71	23.7	76.3	23.4	38.12

In such a transition from a ‘miracle paradigm’ to a ‘recession paradigm’ (Lee and Lin 2017), the population’s previous labour skills became unwanted. When explaining the rise of the service economy since the 1990s, scholars and experts have suggested that it is the result of ‘absorbing’ a large portion of middle-aged and low-skilled factory workers and managers who lost their jobs and turned to low-paid and precarious, atypical work (Lin et. al 2011, 127-143). Similarly, Chen and Shi (2012) have moreover discovered that women have a stronger tendency to take atypical jobs than men. A research report of the Ministry of Health and Welfare further suggests that, for middle-aged and elderly women, most opportunities for such atypical jobs are working as restaurant cleaners, home-

¹¹¹ Taiwanese Directorate General of Budget, Accounting, and Statistics. 2019. *DGBAS Data Repository: For Labour Force Data*. Taipei, Taiwan:

https://win.dgbas.gov.tw/dgbas04/bc4/timeser/indu_f.asp.

¹¹² In the governmental survey design, other options for causes for unemployment include dissatisfaction with previous job, injury or illness, termination of seasonal or temporal task, (female) marriage or giving birth, retirement, and being occupied by household tasks.

based care givers, or breakfast shop workers—exactly the jobs Mei and Chu took before they volunteered at Tzu-chi recycling. The limited choice and the job characteristics reflect the non-transferable skills of the middle-aged women's former jobs as manual craftswomen, while working as a caregiver or cleaner or at a breakfast shop is a result of transferring their homemaking skills to the labour market. Either way, choosing an atypical job is a choice of continuity, that is, being flexible for the sake of the enduring dual responsibility of being a (Taiwanese) woman: housekeeping and family income. ¹¹³

Just as the market economy can turn certain kinds of people into surplus resources, it can also make them redundant. Michelle Yates (2011) has argued this view theoretically. She has proposed that, when labour is reduced to a factor of production, a social system thus displays what she calls a 'logic of human disposability' based on its roots in the logic of capitalist mode of production. 'Waste', then, becomes a common metaphor for understanding the continuous dislocation of work and the disposability of people (Doherty and Brown 2019, 5).

A parallel drawn in Zygmunt Bauman's work *Wasted Lives* (2004) can be inspirational here. Characterising *liquid* modernity as a civilisation of 'excess, redundancy, waste, and waste disposal' (*ibid.*, 97), Bauman affirms that the categories of waste material result from a social order that has been cultured to abide by planned obsolescence. Likewise, the production of 'waste lives'—cast out people and communities—at a systematic level is fully compatible with the logic of modern societies. For Bauman, according to the logics of the modernist system dominated by market-driven and progressive imperatives, those who do not or are unable to perform in a way that would appear 'meaningful' are 'naturally' required to step aside by the system. Bauman terms 'disposable people' the 'collateral damage' of the system (2011), even though this state of being often explained by their own failure to be resourceful enough to be of use.

Some of the waste studies literature considers the rather direct entanglement of and interaction between surplus people and waste materials. The literature

¹¹³ Government of Taiwan, Ministry of Health and Welfare, Social, and Family Affairs Administration. 'Zhonggao Ling Funu Xuqiu Pinggu Yanjiu Baogao' 中高齡婦女需求評估研究報告, coordinated by Hung Hui-Fen. Taipei: Foundation of Women's Rights Promotion and Development, 2018.
https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwiZpfKmqZnlAhWEKFAKHVr0AdsQFjABegQIABAH&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.taiwanwomencenter.org.tw%2Fupload%2Fwebsite%2Ftwc_5ab44799-64ee-4661-8040-f533337af720.pdf&usq=A0vVaw28ijdp9-Q-P8Lqe12PB267 (accessed on 13 October 2019).

shows that, when global society throws more and more manufactured goods into rubbish bins, more people who are washed out of labour markets by the global economy turn to waste work in order to get by (for example, Gowan 1997; Reno and Alexander 2012; Parizeau 2015). Researchers have demonstrated that, far from being structurally irrelevant or absolutely excluded from the production scheme, waste workers in different societies are tenuously and unevenly integrated into the market economy as they collect, sort, and resourcify rubbish. While re-inserting the discarded materials into mainstream resource flows, their labour is also ‘recovered’ and placed back into the (re)production chain of the national or global recycling economy to capture marginal gains.

Tzu-chi recycling volunteers, particularly those who are the focus of this chapter and who are the former manual and later atypical workers before retirement, represent a specific group of Taiwanese individuals whom the market economy has utilised and subsequently discarded. Their engagements in Tzu-chi recycling represent this waste-labour entanglement in an emblematic and particular way. The symbolic representation shows labourers in Taiwan who used to make and assemble a variety of consumer goods at industrial and domestic factories and who now unmake and disassemble a variety of consumer goods at multiple recycling sites and on different scales. The lives of these volunteers—largely non-commissioned, elderly, retired, and female—are entangled with commodity markets. Moreover, the transition of their working lives, the jobs they take and have taken, and the places they have been mirror the ‘social life and afterlife of things’ (Reno 2009) through which materials travel across different markets. The peculiarity, on the other hand, is the volunteerism of the engagement. Unlike waste workers whose livelihood depends on waste, the Tzu-chi individuals volunteer to engage in waste work.

To illustrate this particularity, I tell the story of Dong, a male, non-commissioned Tzu-chi recycling volunteer. Dong’s work experience encapsulates how the tide of the Taiwanese industrial transition sweeps up and leaves behind labour and skills. The 60-something was a former mechanic who lost his factory job in the early 1990s and later became a part-time mechanic repairing plumbing and electronic devices at homes and businesses. After his semi-retirement in the early 2010s, he volunteered at the dismantling zone of a Tzu-chi recycling station in Yilan county on an irregular basis. While dismantling a motor, Dong told me the reason he volunteered at Tzu-chi recycling: ‘Otherwise, the [skills] learned for 40 years

would turn out to be useless, just like this [the motor]'.¹¹⁴ Dong's comment exemplifies the entanglement of discarded material and discarded labour at an almost confrontational level. The revalidation of the value of that discarded motor in Dong's hands is made possible through the recycled 'usefulness' of Dong's skill, and vice versa. In other words, through the 'reflexive and flexible intervention' of the market economy of recycling, which shifts the boundaries that define where markets are (Gregson et. al 2013), the formerly externalised labour and objects brought each other back to be included again.

4. Concluding Remarks

This chapter is an effort to challenge and complicate our current understanding of Tzu-chi recycling volunteering as dominated by a religious, environmental, or traditional value-oriented view that focuses on the commissioned volunteers. Instead of seeing the individuals who work in the Tzu-chi recycling stations as Tzu-chi's religious and organisational volunteers, I regard them as voluntary waste workers and attend to the category of non-commissioned community volunteers, who are the mainstay of Tzu-chi's recycling labour force. From this perspective, I explore their relationship with the task to explain their decision to volunteer and the choice of recycling. While highlighting features of recycling labour for Tzu-chi, which involves extensive, meticulous, and repetitive manual processes of disassembly, I clarify the distinctive characteristics of Tzu-chi recycling volunteers. The majority of the non-commissioned recycling volunteers are elderly, female, retired individuals who previously participated in Taiwan's industrial modernisation process as manual workers, and who later had a life experience as an 'atypical worker'.

As the chapter reveals, their voluntary engagement in Tzu-chi recycling is deeply embedded in the historical development and transition of Taiwan's economic industry since the 1960s in two ways. First, through a work ethic, industrial modernisation cultivates a person's economic potential to the extent that it is no longer merely the period of their working life; rather, their whole lifespan becomes the object of the best possible utilisation by the apparatus of economic production. For those who volunteer for Tzu-chi after retirement, continuing their productivity, as a way to show a person's value and worth, underlines their motivation. Second, the choice of recycling reflects a latent connection between

¹¹⁴ Interview with Tzu-chi recycling volunteer Dong at the Yilan Dong-dong station (16 May 2016).

the working lives of the former atypical manual workers and the social lives of things. In the eyes of these voluntary waste workers, the discarded materials are emblematic of their once-discarded manual skills and life experience. Therefore, from making to unmaking/remaking objects, the choice of recycling as a task becomes symbolic; it is not only a process of recycling materials, but also of their labour and skills. The temporal properties of the volunteers and waste materials are once again included in the market economy and attained at Tzu-chi recycling. From this perspective, Tzu-chi recycling sites are more than community sites where activities related to environmental efforts, religious training, and the recovery of materials take place. Instead, they become manufacturing factories and produce recycled products, including the volunteers' labour and skills, as well as broken items converted into resources the market economy needs. Regardless of the organisation's ideological stance, in a world where ideas of technological progress continue to provide the benchmark to determine human progress, the task of utilising surplus/discarded resources has itself become an industry.

