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

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Chapter Five |

The Volunteers and Their Volunteering

1. A Typical Day at a Tzu-chi Recycling Station

At 9:30 am on an ordinary weekday in April 2016, I walked through the gates of the Tzu-chi Bade (八德) recycling station in the heart of Taipei City. The Bade station is one of the Tzu-chi district recycling stations where I conducted most of my participant observation in 2016. The dilapidated, four-storey building is the abandoned dormitory of a former state-owned enterprise. It served as the temporary location for the Bade recycling station during the construction of the district's new congregational hall, Jingsi Tang, two blocks away. The six-storey building would have a floor space of nearly 1,000 square meters and was the intended new site of Bade recycling.

While walking towards the rear of the derelict building of the temporary site, where the recycling takes place, a male commissioner sitting in the guard room next to the gate greeted me: 'Morning sister, come to do *huanbao* today?' This was my second visit, and the male commissioner had been the first to welcome me three weeks earlier when I came to the station to ask about volunteering. Twice a week, he fulfils his commissioner duty shift at the recycling station by assisting the public with separating the recyclables they bring to the station, or by welcoming those who come to volunteer or visit the site. I met the chief commissioner of the station on my second visit. The commissioner, who was in

her 70s and, with her husband, had been volunteering in the Tzu-chi recycling programme for more than two decades. During our first encounter, the chief commissioner assigned me the task of plastic bag recycling because the intricate work this requires means that they are 'always in need of people'.



Figure 5.1 Outside the plastics recycling room at the temporary Tzu-chi Bade recycling station in Taipei (photo by the author, 2016)

As I approached the room in which plastic bag recycling takes place, I noticed that the disposable wet raincoats I had hung out to dry the day before were all gone. It turned out that Chu, one of the senior volunteers who had coached me in recycling the plastic bags, had arrived at the station at 8:00 that morning and had already finished what I had left the previous afternoon. Sitting on a pink plastic chair and surrounded by receptacles of unsorted plastic wrapping and bags, Chu said she knew I would be coming that day: 'Shen told me on the phone last night'. Shen is another volunteer at the plastic-bag recycling section, and we had spent the previous afternoon together.

I put on my recycling gear: a pair of gloves, an apron, and a long-sleeved shirt to protect me against the mosquitos during the early but already warm summer. I retrieved two bags of unsorted plastic packaging from a storage space at the back of the room, where about 40 bags of packaging were piled up, waiting to be

processed. Over the next two hours, Chu and I cut out the coloured parts of the plastic wrapping from the transparent parts and removed labels and stickers while chatting about the best morning markets in Taipei, Chu's experiences of Tzu-chi recycling, food choices in the Netherlands, and how Chu's family disapproved of her volunteer work at Tzu-chi. Occasionally, Lian, a man in his 60s who sat in the corner of the same room, and passing volunteers from the paper and PET bottle recycling zones would join in our conversations.



Figure 5.2 Inside the plastics recycling room at the temporary Tzu-chi Bade recycling station in Taipei (photo by the author, 2016)

Around 11:35 am, the chief commissioner came to announce that lunch was almost ready. All the volunteers gradually filed out of their work rooms into the canteen and filled their plates with the vegetarian dishes, soup, and fruit on offer. The free meals prepared by the on-duty Tzu-chi catering volunteers every day were a thank-you for the volunteers' contributions from the local Tzu-chi congregations and commissioners.¹¹⁵ Shortly after most of the volunteers sat down, with all the men on one side and all the women on the other, as was the custom, a senior volunteer walked to the front of the hall. He asked the crowd to stand up and sing Tzu-chi's lunchtime thanks song, the 'offering

¹¹⁵ Generally, Tzu-chi recycling sites or local congregations have their own budgets for food procurement. However, it is not unusual for the catering volunteers to contribute to procuring food or providing the ingredients themselves.

song' (供養歌¹¹⁶). People pressed their hands together in the Buddhist gesture and sang along. The lyrics are as follows:

*Offering to the Buddha,
Offering to the Dharma,
Offering to the monk,
Offering to all the sentient beings,
May cultivate all the goodness,
May eliminate all the evil,
May transcend all the sentient beings.*¹¹⁷

After the singing, the senior volunteer turned on two second-hand televisions that had been repaired at the station and switched them to Tzu-chi's Da-ai channel. As usual, the midday news was on, airing Tzu-chi's national and international events and news.



Figure 5.3 Canteen at the temporary Bade recycling station when the volunteers were having their lunch (photo by the author, 2016)

Seventy-two-year-old Mei sat down next to me and commented on the lunchtime meal. Like Shen and Chu, Mei is a Tzu-chi non-commissioned but certified recycling volunteer. As newcomers, Lian and I were the only ones who had not gone through the certification process of missionary volunteers and received the grey uniform. Like all of us, Mei specialised in plastic bag recycling. Before I could ask, she explained that she had been at another Tzu-chi recycling base in the morning: 'They were short of people. The plastic bags were piled up to the ceiling!

¹¹⁶ gongyang ge

¹¹⁷ See Appendix, quotation 5-1 for the Chinese text and pin-yin.

So they asked me if I would go and help'. It was not difficult to detect a sense of pride in Mei's tone, despite the fact that I was distracted by the conversation taking place among the three commissioner volunteers next to us. The commissioners were discussing the 'Northern Region Environmental Volunteer Improvement Training Course' (北區環保志工精進研習課程¹¹⁸) that would be held at another large recycling station in two weeks.

At 12:45 pm, on my way back to the plastic bag room, I passed a male volunteer who had already resumed dismantling an electronic rice cooker in the hallway. Meanwhile, I saw Chu and several others in the repair room, busy going through bags of clothes that someone had just donated. The volunteers sort and repair the donated clothes before they are resold at Tzu-chi's second-hand shop, the Cherished Blessing Shop¹¹⁹ (惜福屋¹²⁰), located at the front of the dormitory building. Later, the volunteers returned with their 'shopping results'. My fellow volunteers were amazed by the quality and how intact their items were. 'There are rich people living in this neighbourhood [...] they've just forgotten what they've bought,' Mei opined, shaking her head. I noticed that some of the clothes were high-end international fashion brands with the tags still on.

Around 1:30 pm, the station chief suddenly appeared in the room and hurriedly asked if anyone had not yet had their blood pressure measured: 'All volunteers need to have it taken. [...] It's part of the welfare of being a Tzu-chi recycling volunteer!' The chief added that, without a record of the volunteers' health, she could be 'accused' of not taking care of them.

At 2:15 pm, when I returned to the plastic recycling room after the blood pressure measurement, Lian had gone for his weekly hospital check-up, and Chu was about to leave, too. However, another commissioner had joined the room; wearing the casual Tzu-chi uniform of a blue polo shirt, the female commissioner sat opposite Mei and joined in the recycling work. Like the gatekeeper and the catering volunteers, the woman fulfilled her weekly shifts as a commissioner by volunteering at the Bade recycling station. As I joined the female commissioner and Mei to separate 'e-white' (transparent polyethylene) plastic packaging from 'p-coloured' (coloured polypropylene), I asked if the commissioner, Bai, would attend the 'improvement training course' that the other commissioners had discussed during the lunch break. Bai did not plan to join, as 'it is mainly for [non-

¹¹⁸ beiqu huanbao zhigong jingjin yanxi kecheng

¹¹⁹ Since 2014, Tzu-chi has gradually closed its second-hand businesses.

¹²⁰ xifu wu

commissioned] community volunteers'. Instead, she mentioned she would be involved in the Earth Day Festival, where the local congregation would set up a stall and some commissioners would 'educate the public' about Tzu-chi's environmental philosophy and achievements.

Around 3:40 pm, Bai went to lock the door, and Mei started to sweep the floor. I placed the day's sorted plastics in the 'categorised' storage room. While saying goodbye, Mei asked if I would come again the following day. Apologetically, I said no. In response, Mei said, 'That's not a problem, come whenever you can, there's no pressure to do this'. She made similar comments two more times before she headed to her bus stop.

2. Moving Beyond the Economic Structural View

In addition to providing a more grounded idea and overview of how Tzu-chi recycling takes place on site, the ethnographic account of one particular day I spent at the Bade recycling station is an illustration of how recycling is structured and infused with sociocultural significance inside the station. It depicts the daily happenings with works of moving, classifying, separating, cleaning, and storing waste materials, as well as the different types of volunteers who engage in numerous tasks and participate in various events. It shows social interactions and activities (e.g., daily conversations, purchasing unwanted items, and a training assembly) as well as the different welfare services (e.g., lunch and the blood pressure measurements) found in the stations. All these aspects constitute the lively scenery of Tzu-chi community recycling.

The above ethnographic description provides an opening to understand the people and labour of Tzu-chi recycling, which differs from yet complements the accounts in the previous chapter. In Chapter Four, the discussion addressed who the volunteers are and why they volunteer from an economic-structural perspective. I then argued that the individuals' commitment to volunteering and their choice of recycling are the result of socio-economic forces and forms; their motivation to volunteer is a manifestation of having a practice of a work ethic of being productive, and recycling recycles their labour. However, as this chapter aims to show, this argument is only one side of the story. What has so far been left out in the analysis is the perspectives of the volunteers.

By continuing the discussion of the relationship between the Tzu-chi recycling volunteers and the task, this chapter explores the issue with reference to the

volunteers' lived and living experience. To this end, I pay particular attention to their interactions with waste materials and with each other. I ask: what is the role of the materiality of waste and the physicality of recycling work? What kinds of environments in Tzu-chi recycling stations have attracted their participation? In what way can one make sense of their choice of recycling in relation to the accounts they give of their past, present, and future? By doing so, I argue that the physical, sensory, and communal aspects of Tzu-chi recycling labour evoke a sense of familiarity for the volunteers through their embeddedness in Taiwan's historical economic development. In this register, recycling is a way for the volunteers to cope with a rapidly changing world.

In order to address the importance of having a dialectical way to understand Tzu-chi recycling volunteers and labour, the chapter begins with the continuation of the view of Tzu-chi as a 'manufacturing site' of recycled labour and materials. I highlight how the organisation benefits from different forms of values the volunteers bring and produce and describes Tzu-chi's 2014 public crisis which brought this view into the public eye. While illustrating the incident, the section also critiques the tendency in the public narratives to depict Tzu-chi recycling volunteers as the organisation's ignorant, deluded victims. With this critique, I emphasise the indispensability of understanding Tzu-chi recycling not only from an economic-structural perspective, but also from a volunteer's point of view. Therefore, in the second part of the chapter, I return to my participant observation to clarify the 'other side' of the same volunteering and labour coin.

3. Volunteers or Victims?

During my earlier visits to Tzu-chi recycling stations, in response to my stunned facial expression and to asking why such a detailed classification and complicated processes were applied, the first reason the volunteers gave was consistently practical in nature. For example: 'The more detailed the separation, the better the price you get', or, 'Otherwise, the recycling factories would not want [to buy] them'. Most Tzu-chi recycling volunteers could easily name, or at least rank, the values of different materials. Newspapers have the highest price, followed by white paper, and then paper of mixed colours; the price of one discarded fan that has not been dismantled is 10 dollars, but after disassembling, it is 100; the integrated circuit board with double green sides is A-class, which means that it can sell at a better price.

Suddenly, between the conversations of how polluted the world has become and how recycling as a religious practice purifies minds and brings a community together, the act of waste sorting falls back into an economically productive enterprise. The recycling practice is a means to make money, no less remunerative and no less morally complex than other modes of material transaction. These reactions from the Tzu-chi volunteers echo Martin O'Brien's view. That is, when people and systems organise waste materials, the 'intimate individual and collective meanings' first divested are 'connected [...] to economic contexts in which their pecuniary value might release profits to private enterprise' (2012, 122). The recyclables are the commodities produced through the labour of classification. Therefore, the more labour involved in the production process, the more refined goods are, and the better price there will be, as the volunteers explained. In addition, the profits Tzu-chi recycling earns contribute to the operations of the Tzu-chi conglomerate. Because of the volunteers' unpaid labour, the income is lucrative, amounting to nearly 48 million NTD (1.4 million euros) in 1994.^{121;122} Today, all of the recycling profit goes to funding the Tzu-chi-owned television station Da'ai TV (see Chapter Seven).

Moreover, the recycled PET bottles the volunteers collect and sort are used to manufacture a wide variety of the 'green' products that the Tzu-chi-associated, listed company Da-ai Technology sells at Tzu-chi shops. A tag printed with a Quick Response (QR) code is attached to some of those products, such as polo shirts and blankets. The digital sign leads to a webpage telling the stories of Tzu-chi recycling volunteers, describing how individuals who are unknown to society contribute to environmental protection and social betterment through their selfless endeavours. Through the addition of the QR code, the life stories of these recycling volunteers are summarised, codified, and materialised through the operation of marketing and technology, turning them into another layer of value added to the products made from the rubbish they recycle.

¹²¹ Tzu-chi Almanac 1995, "Hui gui xin ling de gu xiang" 回歸心靈的故鄉, 166.

¹²² The annual income for 1994 is the only public record that I could find of the Tzu-chi recycling programme's financial achievements, in addition to several mentions of local community outcomes in the early Tzu-chi almanacs. Additionally, Chen (2007) has estimated that more than 160 million NTD (4.5 million euros) were made through the Tzu-chi recycling scheme between 1990 and 2007. Given the high market price for recycling in the 2000s and the scope of the Tzu-chi recycling programme, I believe that Chen's estimate is significantly understated. Nevertheless, for every year since 1995, Tzu-chi has published its total recycling volumes by material category in the Tzu-chi almanac.

In other words, at minimal cost, the Buddhism-based organisation benefits greatly from the variety of personnel, financial, material, and symbolic values the Tzu-chi volunteers and their labour recover and create. In this regard, the welfare services provided at Tzu-chi recycling sites—free lunch, blood pressure measurements, and volunteer training activities—are considered part of the same power operation to fashion people as workers and to continue their productivity. On this account, it is not surprising to find some narratives in the public and media that regard the recycling volunteers as victims of Tzu-chi's religious economy. Such narratives have become particularly discernible since 2014, after a Facebook post by former national policy advisor and well-known businessman Dai Sen-tong (戴勝通) suggested the social problems caused by Tzu-chi and its recycling engagement.

3.1 Victimisation controversy

In April of 2014, Dai posted a picture of a one-sentence, hand-written note addressed to Tzu-chi on his Facebook fan page. The sentence stated, 'Please save some bites for the working poor' (請留口飯給艱苦人吃¹²³). Together with the picture, Dai wrote in the first part of his posted message that about 20,000 low-class 'working-poor' (艱苦人¹²⁴) individuals rely on their PET bottle collection to make about 5,500 NTD dollar (about 160 euro) per month for a living. Dai wrote, 'Now it has all changed' because Tzu-chi carved up the market, depending on 'free volunteers' and the 'home factory' of Da-ai technology to 'fight over interests' with individual recyclers, using the lucrative income to purchase land. The rest of the post further elaborates his criticism of Tzu-chi's hospital policy and organisational financial management as a whole.¹²⁵

Dai's Facebook message received more than 350,000 views the day it was posed.¹²⁶ It caught the attention of a variety of national news media, leading to an

¹²³ qing liu kou fan gei jiankuren

¹²⁴ The word *jiankuren* (艱苦人) is a traditional and sympathetic term for the working poor in Taiwanese Hokkien. A vernacular term often associated with rag pickers and individual waste workers.

¹²⁵ See Appendix, quotation 5-1 for the full message content in Chinese text and pin-yin.

¹²⁶ Shenghuo Zhongxin 生活中心, "'Qing Ciji Liu Kou Fan Gei Qiongren" Daishengtong pi Zhigong Qiangzuo Huishou; Ciji: Feiyingli' 「請慈濟留口飯給窮人」 戴勝通批志工搶做回收 慈濟: 非營利, *Apple Daily*, April 17, 2014.

<https://tw.appledaily.com/headline/daily/20140417/35772195/> (accessed 13 October 2019).

outpouring of public discussion as well as criticism of Tzu-chi's actions.¹²⁷ By September 2019, the post had received a total of 10,000 likes and had been shared more than 4,000 times on Facebook.¹²⁸ Dai's Facebook post marked the beginning of a period of intensive public discontent and scrutiny towards Tzu-chi between 2014 and 2016, when two other Tzu-chi-related scandals emerged.¹²⁹

Dai's post divulged information about the competitive and hierarchical nature of the recycling market to the public and referred to Tzu-chi's recycling system as an industrial chain. Three aspects of the recycling market can help clarify Dai's message. First, as illustrated in Chapter Three, Taiwan's recycling system involves a complicated commodity network composed of a variety of players across the industrial chain. Tzu-chi recycling collection, with its almost complete system of supply and processing, carves out about 3% of the national secondary material market supplied by the public, sharing the market with two other main collecting

¹²⁷ For example: Jishi Xinwen 即時新聞, 'Ciji Qiang Huishou Daishengtong: Liu Kou Fan Gei Jiankuren Chi' 慈濟搶回收 戴勝通: 留口飯給艱苦人吃, *Liberty Times Net*, 16 April 2014. <https://news.ltn.com.tw/news/life/breakingnews/989632> (accessed 13 October 2019); Shenghuo Zhongxin 生活中心, 'Ciji Qiang Huishou Daishengtong: Liu Kou Fan Gei Jiankuren Chi' 慈濟搶回收 戴勝通: 請留口飯給艱苦人吃, *Sanlih E-Television*, 17 April 2014. <https://www.setn.com/News.aspx?NewsID=20138> (accessed 13 October 2019).

¹²⁸ Genzhe Dongshizhang You Taiwan 跟著董事長遊台灣. 2014. "Gei Ciji" 給慈濟. Facebook, 16 April 2014. <https://www.facebook.com/taiwanviptravel/photos/a.364192126971526/685386294852106/?type=1&theater> (accessed 13 October 2019).

¹²⁹ After Dai's post, another wave of public criticism towards Tzu-chi was related to the national food safety scandal in Taiwan in 2014. At the time, the Taiwanese food conglomerate Ting Hsin International Group (頂新國際集團) was indicted on charges of fraud and the production and trade of toxic oil for use in food products. The former chairman of Ting Hsin was Wei Ying-chung (魏應充), who was also a founding member of the Tzu-chi international humanitarian group TIHAA and the Da-ai Technology company. While a national boycott occurred of Ting Hsin products, the public condemned Tzu-chi for its silence and considered its attitude to be a cover-up for its famous member. In 2015, the public discontent with Tzu-chi reached its climax because of the development plan of Tzu-chi's Nei-hu environmental (recycling) park, which is controversial due to its choice of location within one of Taipei's municipal conservation areas. Concerned that Tzu-chi's development plan could destabilise the land, some local community residents and environmental groups questioned the legitimacy of the environmental evaluation process and the purpose of the development project. The disputes between Tzu-chi and the local groups caught the attention of the press, and the media railed against the organisation's lack of financial transparency and suspected collusion between the government and conglomerates. Aspersions were cast on the appropriateness of a religious charity conducting such a (financial) policy. In March 2015, Tzu-chi withdrew the Nei-hu development project and held a press conference to ask the public to give it a chance to reform.

conduits through which recyclable waste material travels: governmental waste collection and private business.

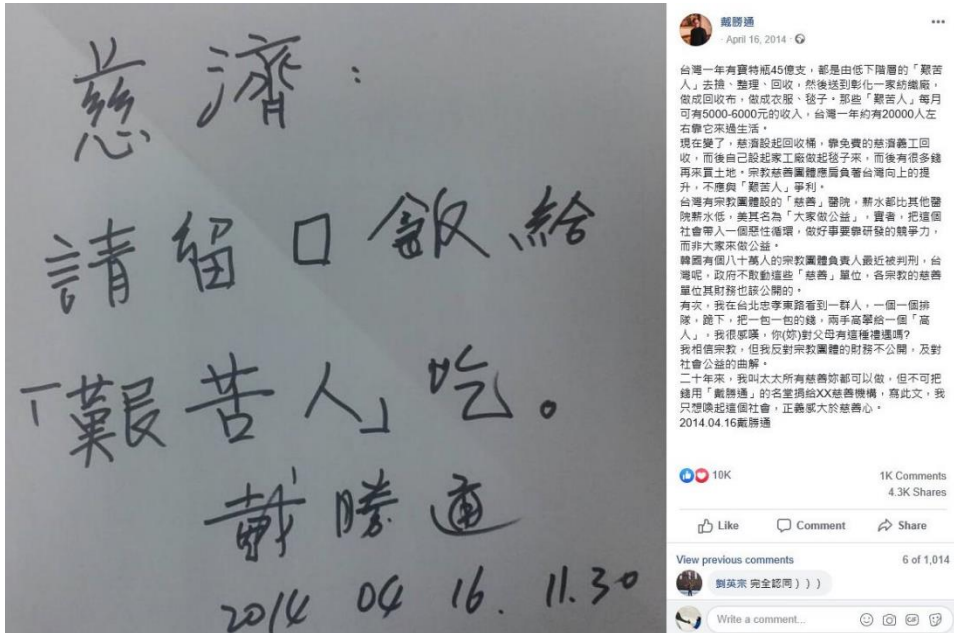


Figure 5.4 A screenshot of Dai Shen-tong's Facebook post

Second, the focus on PET plastic bottles in Dai's post indicates a waste material hierarchy in Taiwanese recycling. This hierarchy differs from the 'waste hierarchy', which connotes a ranked order in a waste and resource management scheme that prioritises practices ranging from waste prevention and recovery to landfills and disposal. Instead, a waste material hierarchy suggests a prioritised order in the waste collection and selection process where collectors, private or public, prefer specific waste items. Although the waste material hierarchy preference is volatile and based on local settings and the global raw material market, it is generally determined by aspects such as monetary value, risk assessment, and working efficiency. Based on my fieldwork in the Taiwanese recycling industry, PET bottles and paper are the two types of waste material collectors' favourites, in addition to available and light-weight metal items such as aluminium cans or copper wires. This is mainly because of their relatively stable and high market price compared to other plastic materials such as PE and PP. Another reason lies in their materiality: bottles and paper are safer to handle

and denser (when PET bottles are compressed) compared to other materials, such as glass and metal. These characteristics make discarded PET the most desirable item for recyclers, resulting in the most competitive market among the collectors.

Third, there is a hierarchy of waste labour which corresponds to their positions in the industrial chain. According to Fang (2001) and Huang (2005), individual recycling collectors in Taiwan are often associated with low occupational status. Moreover, even if the same task of collecting recyclable materials from the public is the same, not all waste work is perceived to be equal. For example, Huang's (2005) research suggests that private collectors such as rag pickers and scrap dealers have a lower social status compared to governmental collectors and Tzu-chi volunteers. Such perceptions make evident the commonality of moral and symbolic registers in viewing waste work. The hierarchy reflects a political assumption about waste work, which 'should be' for environmental compensation or civic expression, not for profit. Waste scholars have also discussed waste labour hierarchies. For example, in Bonatti and Gille's research on women's waste-related engagements in Naples, Italy, the authors note that, in contrast to those who participate in waste campaigns and take out recycling in their household routines—whose work signals moral worth—another group of women, often migrants, handles waste as part of their profession. But they are perceived as engaging in a 'lowly job and a polluting nuisance' (2019, 127). Such a hierarchic perception also seems to apply in the distinction between unpaid but morally praised Tzu-chi volunteers and badly paid, socially stigmatised individual recyclers. Dai's post can be considered a way of speaking up for the latter.

Dai's critical message towards the Tzu-chi organisation, however, led to complex issues regarding waste workers and unintended consequences for Tzu-chi recycling volunteers. I must note that it is not my intention to counter Dai's criticism of the Tzu-chi religious economy, a complicated subject that is beyond the scope of this chapter. Nevertheless, on the one hand, it is questionable whether Dai's concern does justice to individual recyclers and their precarious economic and socially degraded positions, even though the message begins by mentioning them as the primary concern. Briefly described as the 'low class' and the 'working poor' with limited additional information, the lives of individual recyclers and the hybridity of this occupation are reduced into a single, pitiful image, which is then used as an objective fact to support Dai's criticism of Tzu-chi. Put otherwise, Dai's messages reproduce the discourse that victimises waste workers to articulate his opinions about how religion and charity should be. The precarious working conditions of recyclers, the competitive nature of the

secondary material market, and the structural tendencies that contribute to their perceived identities and attributes were not addressed in Dai's message, nor were they fully explored in his later elaborations.

Another group of people who are also assigned to the role of victim in the public discussion of Tzu-chi's recycling business is the Tzu-chi recycling volunteers. Among the public narratives from around and after 2014 which generally share Dai's critique of Tzu-chi, where Tzu-chi recycling volunteers are mentioned, accounts tend to regard the volunteers as ignorant and deluded followers of the organization. Phrases such as 'labour of little value', 'deployed ants',¹³⁰ 'slavery at the bottom of Tzu-chi's class-system', 'almost brain-damaged fools', and 'people who are being tricked'¹³¹ are used to describe the volunteers. Some gave suggestions to the volunteers; for example, instead of recycling, the volunteers should alternatively engage in more 'meaningful' environmental work, such as monitoring industrial pollution.¹³²

The most significant problem with those descriptions of Tzu-chi recycling volunteers is perhaps that they obscure the volunteers' lived experience. Formulating judgement through victimisation also ignores the meaning that recycling has for the volunteers. To say that recycling volunteering is an opportunity rather than a necessity, that it concerns what people receive from doing such work rather than what they put into it, does not deny the hardships and structural issues. However, doing so recognises the agency and life of the volunteers. The volunteers, like the former mechanic Dong from Chapter Four, see themselves in the discarded materials. Therefore, acts of recovering the value of the unwanted material have distinctive value, and they carry personal meaning beyond that of the organisation. Moreover, ignoring individual consciousness

¹³⁰ The Sunflower Movement. '03202015 Xintaiwan Jiayou Pi Lanpao canxuan? Zhuanxiang Luying? Di San Shili? Lihongyuan Zhuanfang! Zongjiao Fengbao! Guagou Zhengjie Beihou? Zongjiao Xuanmin 2016 Yingxiang li? Taiwan Zongjiao Sida Shantou Lupinchang Beihou?' 新台灣加油 披藍袍參選? 轉向綠營? 第三勢力? 李鴻源專訪 宗教風暴 掛勾政界背後 宗教選民 2016 影響力 台灣宗教 4 大山頭屢拚場背後. Uploaded on 20 March 2015. YouTube video, 97:57 min. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=steBnbCuUck> (accessed 13 October 2019).

¹³¹ Chen, Raby. 2018. 'Yitanxue Guoran Shi Jiangjingguo, Wangduanzheng he Zhongyang Ribao Jieru Niezao de Jiagushi' 一灘血果然是蔣經國、王端正和中央日報介入捏造的假故事. Kanqing Ciji Zhenxiang 看清慈濟真相 (blog), 1 June 2018. <http://raby123.blogspot.com/2018/06/blog-post.html> (accessed 13 October 2019).

¹³² Li, Bai-feng 李柏鋒. 2014. 'Da'ai Ganen, Shizai Jiepin Jifu, Haishi Zuo Gongde?' 大愛感恩, 是在劫貧濟富, 還是做功德. Libaifeng de Kuodaji 李柏鋒的擴大機 (blog), 21 October 2014. <https://www.buffettism88.com/2014/10/DaAi.html> (accessed 4 January 2016).

exaggerates the individuals' vulnerability and underestimates their resilience. In fact, the Tzu-chi volunteers are quite aware that the achievements of Tzu-chi recycling are the result of their free labour. They do not unconsciously exclude their own labour value in the economic reckoning of recycling results. When discussing Tzu-chi's detailed classification system, the volunteers stated that regular recycling businesses would never do this because 'it would not be cost-effective if they had to pay people to do that'.¹³³

While criticism of the victimisation of Tzu-chi recycling volunteers is necessary, it does not contradict the claim in the previous chapter that Tzu-chi recycling volunteers represent a specific group of Taiwanese individuals whom the market economy has utilised and subsequently disposed of. It also does not contradict the previous claim that the Tzu-chi organisation benefits greatly, and not only financially, from the volunteers' contribution. Indeed, the volunteers, their lives and labour, are preyed on in Taiwan's industrial modernisation, and Tzu-chi benefits from utilising their remaining labour capacity. This argument is one side of the story. Nonetheless, simplifying individual actions into the results of socio-economic forces and forms only runs the risk of, as Gowan writes, 'jumping too quickly from what capital needs to what capital gets' (1997, 167). In short, the bigoted descriptions in the public narratives show the danger of seeing things *solely* from the structural perspective. Therefore, I now return to my participant observation to clarify the 'other side' of the story.

4. Recycling and Re-living

4.1 Somatic Skills and Tacit Knowledge

'Rely on your feelings' was perhaps the advice given most often during the time I learned and observed recycling work at Tzu-chi. Senior volunteers taught me to make sensory observations by interacting with material objects when separating and dismantling waste. 'Listen to the sound it makes when you rub it; if it rustles, it's most likely a PP', said my recycling 'teacher', Mei. For the first three to four weeks of my volunteering in the Bade plastic recycling room, interactions similar to the following one often took place between me and my recycling fellows Mei, Chu, and Shen:¹³⁴

¹³³ Interview with two Tzu-chi recycling volunteers at the plastic packaging area of the Kaohsiung Sanmin station (8 November 2014).

¹³⁴ Personal communication with Mei and Chu, the Tzu-chi recycling volunteers at Taipei Bade recycling station (21 May 2016).

- Mei: This cannot be recycled. This cushion material. [Mei picks up a piece of PU foam from the pile of recycled plastic packaging and gives it to me while squeezing it.] Feel it? Too spongy.
- Me: Can the less spongy ones be recycled?
- Mei: Like the floor mat for the kids, they can be recycled. But this one can't. [Mei hands me another piece of packaging shell while rubbing it.]
- Me: What is this? How is this different from egg packaging boxes?
- Mei: I don't know what that is. Do you know what this is? [Mei turns to Chu. Chu reaches out to rub the piece of plastic].
- Chu: I don't know what it is called, but it cannot be recycled.
- Shen: Oh, this sort of foam can be recycled. [Shen hands me a piece of EPE foam.]
- Mei: Yes, that is 'E', like guava nets, the fruit packaging.
- Chu: This, this too [can be recycled]. A bit shining and smoother. And its price is higher. [Chu hands me another piece of EPE foam in a different form.]

Without knowing the full chemical nomenclature of different materials, and sometimes finding it difficult to identify the artefacts by their materiality, the volunteers demonstrate ways of categorising plastic packaging materials based on common products made from it, the look and feel of different types of film, the smell when the material burns, the sounds it makes, and the shapes of the edges when the film is torn. The coaching style of Mei, Shen, and Chu was not a peculiar case and did not solely concern plastic materials. Another volunteer in the dismantlement area used similar principles to teach me how to dismantle a motor. Commissioner Du had volunteered for Tzu-chi recycling for more than 16 years. When I interviewed her, she was in charge of the stationary work-top at the dismantling area at the Kaohsiung San-min station. Due to the respect that other volunteers showed to Du, I had assumed that the experienced volunteer would use professional mechanical terms to explain the job. However, the instruction terms Du used turned out to be rather casual and subjective. While placing different retrieved metal components in my hand and suggesting that I feel and weigh each item, Du repeated statements like, 'When you see shapes like this, you

do this, and you will find that', and 'This kind of work is learned through touching'.¹³⁵

What implicitly underlies the descriptions in the volunteers' instructions is somatic, tacit knowledge. Harry Collins has explained somatic tacit knowledge as a type of knowledge that 'we cannot tell [...] but we can have it passed on in ways which involve close contact with those who already have it' by referring to the examples of typing on a keyboard or riding a bike (2010, 99). Thus, the know-how of recycling becomes a sort of 'immethodical expertise' which can only be implemented in relation to specific, physical objects in a concrete scenario. An individual can only gain knowledge through an intricate variety of created and shared experience, and the shared knowledge is mostly expressed in various inconsistency (Clifford 1983, 90). In Tzu-chi's lexicon, this process of gaining somatic knowledge is described as a spirit of *zuozhong xue* (做中學), meaning 'knowing through doing'. It is a motto the organisation uses to emphasise the importance of actual practice more than of abstract discussions.

This dependency on flexible and improvised 'rules of the thumb' and the intrinsic, physical properties of the object instead of the rigid application of abstract, invariant principles to gain technical knowhow are familiar to those with a past as manual workers. For the volunteers, the process of *zuozhong xue*, as well as the meticulous and physical labour of recycling—touching and feeling, sorting and separating, moving and packing, tearing up and hammering down—capture a sense of temporally and historically informed sensory presence. This sensory presence and bodily engagement, according to Thomas Csordas, is a 'pre-objective reservoir of meaning' that renders a sense of 'existential immediacy' as a form of self-identity based on the mutualism of body, self, and culture (1994,10). In other words, recycling as an embodiment of somatic skills and tacit knowledge works like a trigger. It evokes a sense of familiarity, a reminder of those habitual practices from the work the volunteers had before their retirement or when they were young. This is akin to the 'memory-in-action' that Bergson (1988 [1896]) has described; that is, memories are enacted in the present as we engage with our surroundings in habitual ways. Recycling, in this register, is a way to bridge the past and the present, creating a continuity in the volunteer's individual biography.

In addition to the somatic expertise of recycling, the physical setting of Tzu-chi recycling provides another layer of material reference to enacting a sense of

¹³⁵ Interview with Tzu-chi recycling volunteer Duo at the dismantling area of the Kaohsiung Sanmin station (8 November 2014).

familiarity. To some extent, the working environment of Tzu-chi recycling stations resembles those of the 'living room factories', a result of 1970s Taiwan's economic policy and national mobilisation to turn private settings such as residential houses or communal areas into production sites for consumer goods (see Chapter Four). Inside Tzu-chi recycling stations, the volunteers disperse into different corners of a room or into a communal square, squatting on stools next to one another and chatting while working, surrounded by piles of objects waiting to be processed (figure 5.5).

In other words, the physical works and working surroundings of Tzu-chi recycling are sentimentally appealing to the volunteers. Different volunteers told me that coming to Tzu-chi and unmaking items takes their minds off worrying thoughts and stops them from becoming immersed in negative emotions, as tends to happen when there are no tasks to be done. For Chiu, those thoughts mostly concerned her children and grandchildren, which created a sense of helplessness because they were not physically present. Shen told me that watching television could worsen her anxiety when she found it difficult to understand what was happening in the 'strange world'. From this perspective, the work and environment of Tzu-chi recycling is an individual 'survival' coping mechanism, while volunteering for Tzu-chi is an attempt to retain a putative coherence that is unavailable in the fragmented, constantly changing living environment and the irreversible flow of time. Recycling work becomes an axis that links the volunteer's present to the past. However, rather than the restorative nostalgia that Boym uses to describe a retrograde attitude which 'gravitates toward collective pictorial symbols and oral culture' (2001, 49), the recollection of the past in Tzu-chi recycling is embodied habit in the present, which is more 'oriented towards an individual narrative that savours details and memorial signs' (*ibid.*). For the volunteers, engaging in something familiar is not a pretext for nostalgia for midnight melancholia but a creative challenge and possibility. This is seen, for example, in Shen's love of being a non-commissioner, which freed her of a sense of obligation and allowed her to determine how much she wanted to commit to the task. For Mei, the volunteering work offered her a chance to explore the world outside her previous life experience. On the other hand, Chiu's commitment to the volunteering work became a source of leverage in her relationship with her husband, a way to bargain for a sense of autonomy, which she otherwise had relatively little of in her married life. In those scenarios, through that nostalgic longing and the sense of familiarity found in the waste work, the volunteers discover that the past is not that which no longer exists, but something that 'act[s]

by inserting itself into a present sensation from which it borrows the vitality' (Bergson 1988, 240, cited in Boym 2007, 16). In this mode of nostalgia, the past and present are not in disjuncture. Instead, as Coleman argues, 'the past is not what has happened [...] but what is [still] happening' (2008, 93).



Figure 5.5 Tzu-chi recycling volunteers working in a Taipei district station (photo by the author)

4.2 Aging Together

The volunteers surely have a sentimental attachment to the past, which is manifested in their relaxed, cheerful facial expressions, for instance, when talking about the past in comparison to the present, summoning faded memories of helping families and neighbours while working in the 'living room' factories in the old days. However, they did not always talk about the past. In fact, these topics rarely occurred 'naturally' in the daily conversations. Instead, the most common topic in the volunteers' daily conversations concerned present experience—bodily aging as well as entering old age. As mentioned in Chapter Three, while the majority of the non-commissioned but certified volunteers are between 60 and 70 years old, about 43% percent of Tzu-chi non-commissioned volunteers are older than 70, including nearly 30% of the volunteers who are older than 75. For

this reason, a recycling volunteer in the Bade station once made the slightly exaggerated comment that ‘anyone who’s younger than 80 would be considered young in recycling stations’.¹³⁶

In this light, it is not strange that the number of one’s children and grandchildren was almost a standard part of any self-introduction. Greetings were often coupled with asking about each other’s health conditions, and the conversations were laced with tips on choosing doctors, hospitals, and caregivers, along with gossip and jokes. In those moments, the life experiences and problems that were central to the cohort of elderly people and that may be associated with weakness and marginality became sources of solidarity among the Tzu-chi recycling volunteers. A person’s experience of mental decline and physical illness became the reference point for others to understand one’s own body and state. In those scenarios, the on-going recycling engagement became an affirmation of one’s still-functional body and mind. The volunteers used it as a ‘piece of evidence’ in exchanging mutual consolation and encouragement.

The shared experience was not limited to bodily change, but also included a common awareness of the proximity of death. On a limited number of occasions, when Mei, Chu, and Shen discussed something with a religious grounding, which was not often, they mentioned chanting the sutras at other volunteers’ funerals. After, they named the fellow volunteers whom they recently ‘sent away’ and described memories of them. Once, an 85-year-old comforted a dispirited volunteer who thought of her deceased volunteer friend. The 85-year-old volunteer reminded her that her friend had been ‘joyfully doing recycling’ before her last days and ended the consolation by remarking that the deceased volunteer set an example for them to ‘live fully until the end’.¹³⁷ Recycling volunteering, in this context, is evidence of living fully.

The challenge to ‘age and die well’ was not only a concern among the elderly Tzu-chi volunteers, but also in Taiwanese society as a whole. Within five decades, the demographic structure of Taiwan has experienced a radical change, with an alarming acceleration speed of ageing and a declining fertility rate. As late as the mid-20th century, Taiwan was largely rural, agricultural, and young. At the time, only 2.5% of the population was ‘senior’, or over 65 (Huang 2010). However, in 1993, the senior population accounted for 7%; and in 2018, it became 14%, and

¹³⁶ Personal communication with a Tzu-chi volunteer at the Taipei Bade station (9 July 2016).

¹³⁷ Personal communication with two Tzu-chi recycling volunteers at the Taipei Bade station (8 November 2014).

Taiwan officially entered the era of an 'aged society' according to the standards of the World Health Organisation. Elderly Tzu-chi recycling volunteers represent this brand new generation of an aged population that has not been seen before, a generation that has only recently emerged in Taiwan and in the rest of the world. Facing rapid demographic structural change, Taiwan lacks facilities and long-term care services. In the 1990s and 2000s, corresponding gerontology policies started to emerge. At the time, the provision of social services was transferred from the central government to local governments and NGOs, and community-based support for the needs of the rapidly aging population were implemented (Wang 2013). Among non-profit organisations, rising expectations extend to faith-based organisations, particularly to local congregations, to provide relevant social services (Chang 2015).

The volunteers told stories of people taking their elderly parents to a Tzu-chi recycling station before work and picking them up afterwards.¹³⁸ In this context, the Tzu-chi recycling site is described as a 'light safe home' (輕安居¹³⁹), a geriatric day care location where elderly people 'go to work' regularly, in the Tzu-chi lexicon.¹⁴⁰ In these 'alternative' centres for the elderly, free lunches, blood pressure measurements, and medical check-ups are the social welfare services provided, while a variety of tasks that recycling encompasses serve as different physical exercise activities for the participants. In other words, volunteering at Tzu-chi recycling communities has become part of a coping strategy, not only for the volunteers but also for their families, to deal with the structural novelty of having such a large elderly population. This strategy involves a process of mobilising familiar skills, engaging in nostalgic tasks, and being surrounded by people who share similar experiences and challenges related to their phase in life.

¹³⁸ Interview with a Tzu-chi environmental cadre of the Taipei Neihu station at the Annual Volunteer Training event (6 July 2016).

¹³⁹ Qingan ju

¹⁴⁰ See, for example: Tzu-chi Foundation. 2010. 'Xunhui Shengming de Jiazhi Huanbao Jiaoyu Zhan Chengwei Laoren Xinleyuan' 尋回生命的價值 環保教育站成為老人新樂園. *Cishan Xunxi* 慈善訊息 (news blog), 1 May 2010.

<http://news.tzuchi.net/tccm.nsf/04a1ed8230e768ac4825685f0033abfa/76998a4bd2b706614825771600353288?OpenDocument> (accessed 13 October 2019); Lin, Shu-duan 林淑緞.

2010. 'Qingjing Qingan ju Huxin Hu Dadi' 清淨輕安居 護心護大地. *Tzu-chi Foundation Website*, 11 November 2010. www.tzuchi.org.tw/全球志業/臺灣/item/9043-清淨輕安居--護心護大地 (accessed 13 October 2019).

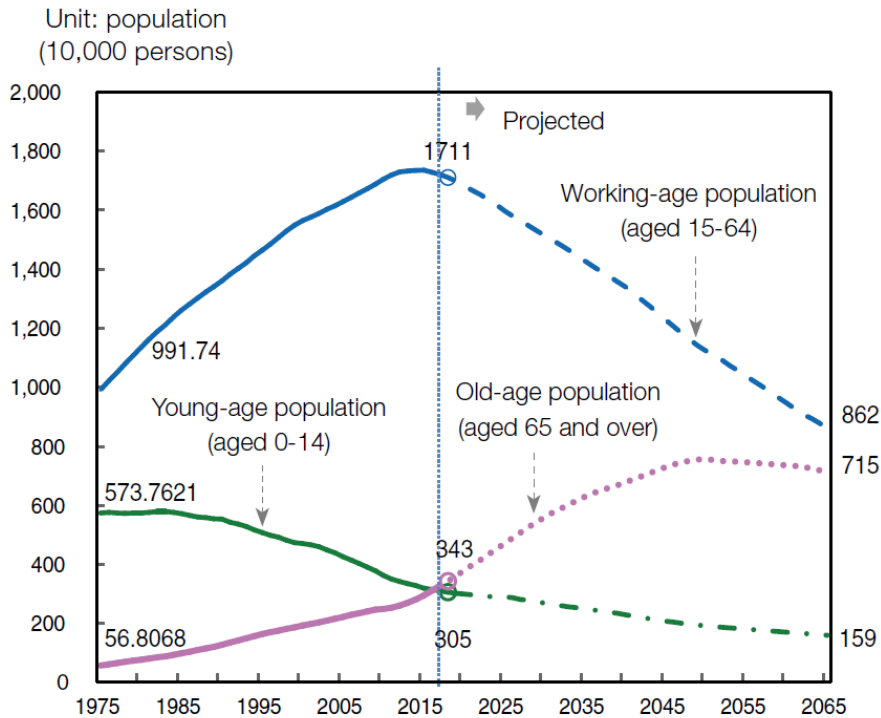


Figure 5.6 Trend in Taiwanese population of three broad age groups, 1975-2065
(Source: National Development Council¹⁴¹)

5. Concluding Remarks

Individuals come to Tzu-chi recycling to volunteer because of their past. As the previous chapter shows, this past concerns their working experience as manual workers, their once-discarded labour and skill, as well as a central belief in productivity moulded and embedded in Taiwan's condensed economic transition, which the volunteers experienced in their youth. Nevertheless, this chapter tells the other side of the same story by exploring the connection between the commitment to recycling volunteering and their past from the individual's perspective. By focusing on the interactions the volunteers have with the materials and with other people in the station, I show that what motivates the

¹⁴¹ National Development Council. 2018. *Zhonghua minguo renkou tuigu (2018 zhi 2065 nian)* 中華民國人口推估(2018 至 2065 年). Taipei, Taiwan: [https://pop-proj.ndc.gov.tw/upload/download/%E4%B8%AD%E8%8F%AF%E6%B0%91%E5%9C%8B%E4%BA%BA%E5%8F%A3%E6%8E%A8%E4%BC%B0\(2018%E8%87%B32065%E5%B9%B4\).pdf](https://pop-proj.ndc.gov.tw/upload/download/%E4%B8%AD%E8%8F%AF%E6%B0%91%E5%9C%8B%E4%BA%BA%E5%8F%A3%E6%8E%A8%E4%BC%B0(2018%E8%87%B32065%E5%B9%B4).pdf)

volunteers' commitment is the latent 'remains' from this economic past: the somatic knowhow, interacting with one and another through tacit knowledge, and the factory-like communal work setting. These aspects provide a sense of recognition of oneself, an antidote to cope with the challenges that lie ahead. Those challenges can be at a personal level, such as one's marriage, life changes after retirement, or aging; they also can be at a broader societal level, such as the lack of an elderly care system or, more generally, a rapidly changing and unfamiliar world. In other words, for the volunteers, waste work becomes an active management of the relationship between past and present. They not only use recycling to relive the past, to experience an accustomed ethical self, but they also use it as a means to formulate a preferred reality.

Seeing Tzu-chi recycling volunteering from the volunteers' perspective with their lived and living experiences tells a quite different story of the same content seen from an economic structural view. Instead of mindless followers of religious mobilisation and exploited victims of economic upheaval, the volunteers are also the ones who give meaning to the waste work. To an extent, they are aware of the material, financial, and labour values they supply the organisation. They nevertheless endeavour to perform the tasks, to navigate, and remake themselves through the work of recycling.