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

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Chapter Nine |

Conclusion

This dissertation examined Tzu-chi recycling, a volunteer-operated, community-based, Buddhism-associated national waste recycling movement in Taiwan that started in the early 1990s. My aim has been to elucidate the sociological significance of waste recycling by exploring what non-object values are retrieved, recovered, and repurposed alongside the process applied to discarded materials. The core inquiry is sociological in that it focuses on social process and change. The dissertation began with a thumbnail sketch that suggested how the multi-faceted nature of Tzu-chi recycling embodies a thematic perspective of the dissertation. That is, recycling is not merely a waste solution nor one event of material conversion; rather, it concerns people, their relation to materials and environments, networks of interactions, and modes of thought. Noting that the phenomenon of Tzu-chi recycling has been concomitant with drastic social transitions in contemporary Taiwan, the introduction stated the dissertation's objective in the following terms: to read post-authoritarian Taiwan through the lens of waste recycling and to understand waste recycling through Taiwan—i.e., the management, practice, understanding and representation of waste recycling in Tzu-chi, and its reflection of and contribution to different social developments in late 20th- and early 21st-century Taiwan.

Throughout the dissertation, the relation between waste recycling and Taiwanese society examined through the case of Tzu-chi shifted across the levels of the individual, community, and institution. And each of the preceding chapters

investigated Tzu-chi recycling with a specific focus, sometimes in a dialectical and complementary manner, on its management, volunteers, community, and discourse. The main argument of this dissertation claims that as a redemptive tool, waste recycling enacts the cultural politics of nostalgia. In different forms of action and ways of seeing, Tzu-chi recycling volunteers and associated members redefine recycling as a past-oriented strategy to deal with all that modernity entails. This leads to the second thematic perspective of this dissertation. That is a 'circular' account of temporality, seeing it as a process of entanglement between memories and imaginations, idealised past and utopian future. The nostalgia enactment through recycling emerges from a sense of trepidation shared by a specific group of people, those who are predominantly the elderly and women, whose sense of belonging lies in the past more than in the present. Through waste engagement, they re-enact their memory identity, mobilising the past to enliven or criticise the present as an endeavour to create a temporal continuum of self. In the process, what Tzu-chi recycling 'recycles' alongside discarded materials, as the dissertation sets out to explore in the beginning, is disposable labour, omitted skill, an aged population, the traditional mechanisms of social interaction, abdicative religion, and worldview.

In order to address the research themes that are informed by the discipline, the dissertation has drawn on two main bodies of scholarly literature. One belongs to the social science study of waste, including studies on the topic of recycling, and the other analyses nostalgia. This dissertation turned to waste studies primarily in order to frame its object and approach to develop its research design, while both studies of waste and nostalgia provided theoretical tools and orientations that could be applied to approach the empirical material collected through fieldwork. The arguments and observations are the results of an approximately four-year period of engaging in the field of Taiwanese recycling between 2014 and 2018. The analysis draws on participation in waste-related activities and work; listening to stories, concerns, and interests; observing daily tasks and interactions; sensing emotions; identifying relationships among the actors; and reading related printed and published documents. A dialectically analytical approach is central throughout the investigation. The dissertation sees waste as a cultural symbol and its material agency, explores waste labour from both individual and structural perspectives, examines the mutuality between sacralisation and secularisation, and considers constructive and restorative aspects of nostalgia.

Taiwan and Tzu-chi Recycling

This dissertation hopes to draw scholarly attention to the case of Taiwan. As identified at the outset, the island society has undergone drastic political economic transitions over the last century, from an agricultural society to a world factory of light commodities to high-tech and capital-intensive manufacturing, from a Japanese colony to Chinese nationalist authoritarian regime to democratic society. Although it has constantly been caught in the status of interim and limbo, given its unclear political sovereign status in relation to People's Republic of China, Taiwan has been in motion with peculiar kinetic energies. The dissertation has sought to give an integrated understanding of the island society by 1) situating the analysis in relation to a number of social changes that occurred in the second half of 20th-century Taiwan, namely the industrial transitions, demographic restructuring, politics of localisation, religious resurgence, and cultural rifts; 2) indicating the role of waste recycling in these phenomena; and 3) demonstrating how nostalgia as a cultural political force has been central to a society undergoing drastic and compressed changes. A brief sketch of post-war and post-authoritarian Taiwan in the introduction chapter provided the historical background for the analysis in the following chapters.

The dissertation overall illustrates that Tzu-chi recycling movement happens in a historical conjecture of waves of Taiwan's contemporary transitioning. First, Tzu-chi recycling is a result of the political economic moment of post-industrial Taiwan, its demand for waste material treatments as well as its abandonment of 'unskilled' and aging labour when the industry transferred from manual manufacturing to high-technological production; second, Tzu-chi recycling strategically took advantage of the uneven political moment of post-authoritarian Taiwan and its craving for local identity in a communal setting when political force dispersed from central to local, which allowed religious forces to take part in secular engagements; and third, the development of Tzu-chi's concerns for environmental disorder rooted in the moment of struggle between the spiritual culture of traditional society and the secularism of contemporary rationalism that the organisation perceives. In short, Tzu-chi's recycling movement builds on emerging and remaining social, cultural, and material resources which, at the time, were in a process of reshuffling and redistribution while new systems were still under construction.

The case study of Tzu-chi recycling in Taiwan was chosen for its scale and complexity, and for its unfamiliar semiotics yet embedded systems. It is an ideal

empirical entry point into broad theoretical topics in the social sciences. Although one basic ambition of this dissertation was to contribute to area studies of Taiwan, the explorative approach of this dissertation should not be limited to an individual case; rather, it is applicable to societies undergoing drastic social changes. From the vantage point of waste, the approach investigates the entanglement between a society's developments and its discards as an examination of its present/past continuum and rupture. By exploring the structural alignment of what is defined as waste and how, why and which 'waste' is brought back to life to be 'recycled', the approach of this dissertation sheds lights on the role of cultural politics of individual and collective memory and affection in social changes.

How Does Tzu-chi Recycling Work?

This dissertation focuses on the environmental project of Taiwan's foremost non-governmental organisation, Tzu-chi, one of its numerous institutional developments. By recognising Tzu-chi as a humanistic-Buddhism-based organisation which came into being in the 1960s and has since actively engaged in a variety of non-religious social tasks, the findings of this dissertation contribute to the study of Tzu-chi by situating its development and social engagements in the networks of materials, people's networks, belief systems, and social changes. Overall, this dissertation uses the term 'Tzu-chi recycling' to indicate a collection of situated local communities across Taiwan that are associated with the Tzu-chi organisation and that collect discarded objects from local neighbouring areas and then sort, separate, and dismantle the materials before selling them to each station's local recycling business partners. Varying in size, Tzu-chi recycling communities together represent a non-governmental conduit of waste disposal, encompassing the sections of downstream, intermediary, and upstream waste collection in Taiwan's recycling logistic scheme, and they are parallel to the conduits of private business and local government.

The dissertation suggests that there are three key mechanisms which make Tzu-chi recycling work: community-based operation, dependency on non-commissioned individual volunteers, and institutional support from the headquarters.

First, in each Tzu-chi recycling community, the assembly of waste materials accompanies with the assembly of people. The formation of the social/material network is an ongoing process of rearranging existing sets of social relations or a

call to form the new ones, through the continuous intersecting and overlapping networks of Tzu-chi recycling volunteers' personal and geographical relations. Grounded in the concreteness of everyday life and the intersections of knowing the place and the people of one's living area, Tzu-chi recycling communities become hubs for cultivating local identity and solidarity. Based on this observation, the dissertation argues that the Tzu-chi recycling community is not an isolated event inside the Tzu-chi world, but one with close connections with other local networks and affairs outside of Tzu-chi. The non-commissioned local volunteers from a variety of walks of life are the mainstay of Tzu-chi recycling. This nevertheless challenges the commonly held view in which the image of Tzu-chi recycling volunteers is that of Tzu-chi commissioners. The dissertation argues that this localised characteristic of Tzu-chi recycling is a key to its success starting from its earliest stages. With a ride on the national localisation project in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Tzu-chi volunteers mobilised their own local resources—people, materials, and properties—to develop a recycling community. Through the reciprocal mechanism of social exchange, recycling converted those resources into political and economic ones. Along with monetary income from waste trades, the political economic resources further contributed to the continued mobilisation of human and material resources. From there, the locally embedded and self-sustained operational system of the Tzu-chi recycling community is formed, and, as shown in the case of Jiaoxi Linmei, expands beyond the realm of Tzu-chi. Moreover, the localised characteristic of Tzu-chi recycling gradually turns the recycling site into a community centre, while the accumulated resources transform into social welfare functions, such as providing meals, health check-ups, and social activities. As Taiwan's aged population has grown without sufficient social facilities, Tzu-chi recycling became an alternative geriatric destination for local retired and elderly individuals to spend time through their volunteering.

Second, inside the stations, a wide variety of discarded household and business materials undergo several stages of treatment, from classification to separation, dismantling to storing. All waste works are performed by human power, by the 'free' labour of the volunteers. A central feature of Tzu-chi's waste work, in comparison to that of governmental and private business systems, is that it is fixated on minute details. Without professional training, Tzu-chi volunteers gain their technical knowhow through each other's shared experience and by relying on flexible 'rules of the thumb' rather than abstract principles. This kind of 'immethodical expertise', which can only be implemented with respect to specific physical objects in a concrete scenario through interactions with others,

contributes to the sociality, the sense of community within Tzu-chi recycling. People talk and exchange experiences, ideas, and stories while working with their hands to engage in either mindlessly repetitive or focus-demanding explorative work. Meanwhile, the people squatting on plastic stools are surrounded by piles of unprocessed and half-processed objects. The characteristics and surroundings of Tzu-chi recycling works present a typical industrial working environment, which is familiar to volunteers with a history as atypical and manual workers. In this setting, the meticulous labour of unmaking becomes a purpose in itself for the volunteers, who can achieve a sense of temporal belongingness and who perform their subjectivity through the mutual enhancement of habits, material perception, and social connection.

Third, although Tzu-chi recycling communities operate rather locally and independently, it would be inaccurate to conclude that there is no centralised system. This dissertation considers three aspects of the institutional disposition that sustains Tzu-chi recycling: the administration team, communication network, and discursive representation. First, the environmental protection team at the headquarters embodies the central administrative system of Tzu-chi recycling. The team is in charge of logs of volunteers, sites and incidences, bureaucratic and legal affairs, financial arrangements, and cross-institution collaborations. In addition, the communication network indicates the institutionalised arrangement through which information is transmitted. The communicative network closely corresponds to Tzu-chi laity's system, through which ideas about, for example, waste categorisation, recycling techniques, volunteer stories, or site management travel and are exchanged. The third institutionalised disposition concerns the representation of waste and recycling. Narratives of what environmental degradation and waste material and recycling practice mean are articulated in a variety of Tzu-chi's organisational media content. The publication and broadcast are the works of the Tzu-chi missionary institute of culture and communication, the institute under which the Tzu-chi recycling programme is registered. Like filling new bottles with old wine, Tzu-chi uses its cultural capital to bring old thoughts and concepts forward with new terms in the production of its environmental discourse. This dissertation regards this strategy of eclectic syncretism as a regional contextualisation and cultural translation of global environmentalism. The aim is multi-faced, counting underlying goals of religious revitalisation and reproducing tradition, in addition to the apparent encouragement for waste recycling. In sum, the administrative, communicative, and discursive institutional arrangements represent an overarching supporting

system that connects dispersed Tzu-chi recycling communities with shared identities and motifs.

Recycling the Past and the Cultural Politics of Nostalgia

This dissertation maintains that the Tzu-chi recycling movement is itself a societal mechanism of recycling. The movement recycles that which represents ‘the past’ of Taiwanese society—those who are left behind in the progressive scheme. The recycled past in Tzu-chi recycling is an admixture, including pre-industrial collective lifestyles, religious worldviews, outdated labour skills, aged populations, and former commodities. From this perspective, the case of Tzu-chi recycling not only gives a concrete illustration of Neville and Villeneuve’s rhetoric on recycling as a ‘mixing of temporalities’ (2002, 7), it also exemplifies the scholarly view on the structural alignment of different forms of refuse. The objects, people, thoughts, actions, and systems which were once incapable of ‘useful’ production now create a parallel world where the waste materials are the centre that holds many discarded together. The dissertation has attempted to go a step further, suggesting a structural alignment of ‘the redeemable’ which made the waste redemption possible. For scholars interested in recycling, one important issue is redeeming the value of the discarded, either by reintegrating it with the production system or by recognising the production value. This view is tinged with the rhetoric of recycling as redemption, implying a process of recovering its declining value. The dissertation proposes that the value redemption of one refuse is made by other refuse, as the entanglement between disposed-of skills and objects discussed in Chapter Four demonstrates.

This way of examining the notion of waste, seeing it not as fixed according to its negative valuation but open to varied forms of expression and transformation, opens out the ‘ontological politics of waste’ (O’Brien 2012). Subsequently, the case of Tzu-chi recycling answers the open question Alexander and Reno posed in their edited book *Economies of Recycling: The Global Transformation of Materials, Values, and Social Relations*, namely, ‘how remaking remakes us all’ (2012, 1). In Tzu-chi recycling, waste practice provides the volunteers a means to enact their subjectivity and practice autonomy; at the level of community, waste materials weave local networks to realise the state project of locality-building; at the level of the institution, waste practice allows the Tzu-chi organisation to realise its religious goals to secularise and revitalise Buddhism. Instead of being an incidental ephemera of society’s productive activities, rubbish matter is at the

centre of meaningful, coordinated social activity. Waste not only serves as a lens to reflect a society, but it is in fact the constitutive element which makes a society, making us who we are. Nevertheless, the dissertation recognises and emphasises that the material agency of waste lies in its rhetorical affordance. It is its symbolic resemblance of discarded skills and lifestyles and its association with forgotten traditional values and religious concepts which bestow waste's power to make and regenerate. This nevertheless bridges the division found in existing scholarly works in waste studies, in which the material-agency and symbolic-structure terms of waste are treated as two separate attributes. Instead, this dissertation has sought to show how metaphors of waste shape the roles it plays in the making of Taiwanese society. In short, waste contributes to a society because of what it symbolises.

Tzu-chi's past recycling happened in a temporal situation created by the fundamental transition in Taiwan in the 1990s and 2000s. This temporal situation implied a rupture between past and present, making nostalgia a desire. As dirt resembles matter in a status of 'caught in between', discarded yet to be allotted its cultural and social space, in reference to Mary Douglas's (1966) view, in a context of highly compressed social changes, the remnants of the proximate past coexist but outside of present system, lingering in the busy new world without their 'placedness' (O'Brien 1999b, 274). Taking a temporal perspective, if a fundamental element of belonging is a time in which people feel at home, then Tzu-chi recycling elderly volunteers represent a group of temporally homeless people in our contemporary society. Tzu-chi recycling stations, in this register, are the new social placement for an emerging new generation of the temporal homeless. At the communal level, the sense of lost traditionality and temporal disjuncture is entwined with the dissonance brought by the changed environment of one's living place and fragmented social relationships. In this context, nostalgia finds an expression in locality longing, a yearning for a sense of place.

While the disturbance and challenges brought by the discarded past reveal the systems of the new, recycling the past nevertheless reflects the project of modernity to order and manage its chaos and ambiguity. Taiwan in the 1990s and 2000s was also at a point when the future was open for construction. Facing future possibilities and increasing problems, what was once discarded appeared to be a pool of resources and solutions. All of these adds up to a cultural politics of nostalgia. A specific group of people take actions, to volunteer, to (re)construct locality, to reproduce traditionality, in response to their experience of loss endemic tradition and life discontinuity. Resources of the past—knowledge, skills,

labour, materials, networks, perspectives—were mobilised and (re)made available and repurposed for further development as Taiwan develops its societal system of value recovery, of ‘recycling’. Waste recycling becomes the political field for nostalgic actions.

While this dissertation contends that Tzu-chi recycling is a manifestation of the cultural politics of nostalgia, it nevertheless endeavours to show that the political force of nostalgia in Tzu-chi recycling takes numerous forms and embodies various meanings. This finding gives an empirical illustration of different aspects scholars have conceptually identified in nostalgia. In the attempt to conceptually reconfigure nostalgia, as discussed in the literature review chapter, scholars have pointed to the key of value transaction of memory to make nostalgia ‘positively charged’ (Pickering and Keightley 2006, 936). This involves a ‘reflexive relationship with the past’, in comparison to a negative account which a mass production of memory, made by people other than individual selves, a problematic one which follows a single plot of identity and gravitates toward collective symbols (Boym 2007, 18; 49).

The value transaction is seen in the ways in which the volunteer individuals enact their past in the present as they engage in habitual ways with materials and surroundings. In the process, the memory no longer represents a past to them; it acts it. This is akin to Bergson’s (1988[1896]) ‘memory-in-action’, or the living past that Coleman (2008, 93) has described in which ‘the past is not what happened [...] but what is [still] happening’, so that the ‘mind does not make a separation between past and present’ (cf. Bergson 1988[1896], 82). For the volunteer individuals, memories of the hardship and possibility from the past are relived as the ethical self in the present through recycling tasks. In other words, this is a memorial practice which resonates with a positive account of nostalgia recognized by the scholars, i.e., making the past prospective and productive. It implies a non-essentialised, contextualised and reflexive process to revive the memory identity while providing it with new forms and functions.

In a similar vein, at a communal level, the sociality of the local environment encompasses the networks and operational mechanisms to foreground the past. In the nexus of physical surroundings inside the recycling stations and the familiar modes of social interactions outside the station, the past is re-encountered and re-experienced through Tzu-chi’s community recycling tasks. In these scenarios, nostalgia functions as a mechanism to have the past and the present exist simultaneously and intersect, transforming the past and assemble it

anew such that it intensifies the present. Based on these observations, this dissertation further demonstrates a ‘materialist’ aspect for this value transaction of nostalgia to take place. That is, the happening of memory de-contextualisation (mobilisation) and re-contextualisation (assimilation) is situated in the constellation of relations between the object and subject and is grounded in a concrete physicality. This could be a physical environment—a recycling station or neighbourhood; it could also be a physical entity—one’s body. It is through an action which interacts with(in) a physical environment that transforms and regenerates memory values.

In addition to highlighting the materialist aspect of ‘productive’ nostalgia, this dissertation contributes to the scholarship by shedding light on the challenging nature of nostalgia’s value transaction. This argument draws from the analysis of the case of the Jiaoxi Linmei. The challenging nature of nostalgia’s value transaction is that recycling the past is not only a work of conversion but also reinsertion. The lost past is never ‘fully lost’, as if there were a historical vacuum waiting for a complete constructive restoration. Like secondary materials have to ‘return’ to the raw material market after recycling, the new local networks of the recycling community as emblems of the reconstructed, idealised past join in the traditional game of local politics. While conflicts arise, the less romantic aspects of tradition emerge, such as competition over interests and resources. In short, the findings of this dissertation resonate with the kind of view Mutka and Hardiman have posed on the past: the dialectical and materialist aspects which ‘understand[s] that what was positive in the past at the same time contained its own negations’ (2000, 126).

Finally, with regard to the operation of nostalgia at the institutional level, this dissertation considers first that Tzu-chi’s environmental discourse is the organisation’s manifesto on its nostalgia motif, and second, that environmentalism is a reference source that provides a futuristic connotation and modern legitimacy to the organisation’s grand nostalgic project. Tzu-chi’s environmental discourse describes a transcendent social order of ecology—it is a combination of habitual customs, the morals of a traditional society, and an anthropocosmic worldview, all of which have roots in pre-industrialised society. Tzu-chi’s pure land vision, by finding a sustainable ecological future in its interpretation of the past, resembles the ‘Edenic motifs’ which Mutka and Hardiman (2000) find in the development of modern environmental theories. In a way, Tzu-chi’s past recycling exemplifies the argument of the scholars, including Davis (2010), Bonnett (2016) and Iambacher (2017), that nostalgia is a powerful

political force to bring forth environmental actions. However, as Mutka and Hardiman (2000) remind us, the problematic aspect of searching for a past Eden, which comes into view in Tzu-chi's institutional discourse, is that the idealist and essentialised account of the past entails work not to transcend it, but to realise it once more. In other words, the past which appears in Tzu-chi's discursive nostalgia is not a living past that exists simultaneously with the present, but a kind of 'memory-image' (Bergson 1988 [1896], 81). While its turn to old images of past impressions contributes to the widespread of the ideas connecting spirituality and ecology, it is worthy to seriously consider if the proposal of restore the past can contribute to an honest confrontation with our changing and complex relationship with nature, and with the issues of current production system of exhaustion and disposal.

