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

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Summary

This dissertation investigates the relationship between waste recycling and contemporary society from a cultural sociological perspective, asking how the process of unmaking materials remakes a society. Taking Tzu-chi recycling in Taiwan as an empirical focus for the exploration, this dissertation shows post-authoritarian Taiwan through the lens of waste recycling and to understand waste recycling through Taiwan. Tzu-chi, a Buddhism-based lay organization and Taiwanese foremost non-governmental organization, has galvanized an army of more than 90,000 volunteers in Taiwan, female elderly in particular, to participate in community recycling as one of the organization's philanthropic endeavours since the early 1990s. In a system of resource recovery formed primarily through the amalgamation of governmental administration and market operations, which make Taiwan one of the societies with highest recycling rates internationally, Tzu-chi recycling stands as a peculiar yet embedded case.

Drawing from a broad ethnographic study in the period from 2014 to 2018, this dissertation examines how and in what contexts Tzu-chi recycling movement came to be, in addition to what social roles and cultural meanings rubbish embodies. The empirical materials that inform the analysis include a series of participant observation at multiple Tzu-chi recycling sites and events, and interviews with the official representatives, administrative and ordinary volunteers, coupled with the analysis of relevant documents and institutional publications.

Two thematic perspectives inform the thinking behind the analysis. First is that recycling is not just about transforming objects but also about transforming people, concerning their relation to materials and environments, their networks of interaction, and modes of thoughts. From there, this dissertation inquires what object/subjective values are retrieved, recovered, and repurposed alongside the process for discarded materials. The second proposition is a circular account of temporality, seeing it as a process of entanglement between memories and imaginations, between social developments and discards. Based on this view, this research illuminates those which are once 'left behind' in Taiwan's contemporary development and the ways in which they are mobilized and fostered by waste recycling in the aspiration for betterment and progress. Thus, this dissertation is of relevance for an understanding of a society's present/past continuum and rupture in relation to waste.

Throughout the chapters, the dissertation analyses four aspects of Tzu-chi recycling: management, people, community and discourse, in order to understand how Tzu-chi recycling has corresponded and contributed to the social changes of Taiwan. Accordingly, in six substantive chapters, each (sometimes as part of a pair with another) corresponds to one of the four aspects of Tzu-chi recycling, and is associated with a specific social development. The social changes examined are those of the national industry's transformation (Chap. 4), an aging society (Chap. 5), a localisation movement (Chap.6), a religious movement (Chap. 7), and shifts of value orientation (Chap. 8).

From a more detail-oriented perspective, Chapter One, *Introduction*, begins with a thumbnail sketch of Tzu-chi recycling, introducing its formation, scales, narratives and endeavours. In addition to the clarification of research inquiry, objects and arguments, the introduction chapter provides a brief overview of contemporary Taiwan in the second half of 20th century, outlining its political, economic, religious and environment-related landscapes as a backdrop to the whole dissertation. The chapter ends with the dissertation structure and research methods. Chapter Two, *Theoretical Points of Departure: Waste and Nostalgia*, discusses two main bodies of scholarly literature. One belongs to the social science study of waste, and the other to the analysis of nostalgia. The chapter explains how each of these two bodies of work has contributed to the formulation of this dissertation's research position and analytic approaches.

The main body starts with Chapter Three, *Recycling Scheme: Taiwan and Tzu-chi*. While locating the Tzu-chi recycling programme in Taiwan's national recycling system, this chapter explains five components of the Tzu-chi recycling programme: volunteer types, recycling sites, material classifications, the administrative task force, and institutional partners. A brief overview of Taiwan's contemporary recycling movement is illustrated. In addition, the chapter presents the industrial logistics networks with a comparative sketch of three national recycling conduits: local government, private business, and Tzu-chi.

Chapter Four, *Disposable and Recyclable Labour*, and Chapter Five, *The Volunteers and their Volunteering*, both concern the characteristics of recycling labour and the ways volunteers make sense of their recycling engagements with Tzu-chi. However, each provides a different yet complementary perspective, one from an economic structural point of view and the other from that of personal lived and living experience. Both chapters challenge the existing wisdom of Tzu-chi recycling which is dominated by an assumption that emphasises the ideological

impetus and a focus on the commissioned volunteers. Chapter Four elucidates how people's voluntary participation in Tzu-chi recycling is embedded in Taiwan's historical development of industrialization. Chapter Five, argues that as remains from the past, the industrial and labour-intensive aspects of recycling in Tzu-chi – the somatic knowhow, tacit knowledge, and the communal working environment – evoke a sense of a familiar self for the elderly and retired volunteers with new meanings in an aged society.

Chapter Six, *(Re)Making the Communities and Locality*, turns the attention to the Tzu-chi recycling community and local networks of waste collection. By analysing the case study of Jiaoxi Linmei community recycling, this chapter shows the pervasive role of (Tzu-chi) recycling in Taiwan's national community-based movement in the 1990s and 2000s, and further demonstrates that the development of Tzu-chi recycling communities is a realisation of a nostalgic yearning for locality. Waste objects in this context become symbolic resources in the course of social exchange; and recycling as an old-fashioned practice is 'recycled' to construct modern civic society. The chapter ends with a twist to propose that Jiaoxi recycling network exemplifies a new type of local faction which emerged through the localisation movement, illustrating how local politics is complicated by the lucrative profits and political opportunities of recycling.

Finally, Chapter Seven, *Recycling and Religion: A Humanistic Buddhist Approach*, and Chapter Eight, *The Cultural Project of Recycling: Traditional Order and Nostalgic Environmentalism*, analyse Tzu-chi's institutional environment-related discourse. Both chapters argue that for Tzu-chi, environmental problems are cultural issues. What the Tzu-chi organization offers is a discourse of cultural translation of global environmentalism and a regional contextualized solution as recycling. Chapter Seven explores the Tzu-chi recycling narrative in relation to the organization's Buddhist identity, while Chapter Eight focuses on the organisation's broader cultural belongingness. In a dialogue with a body of literature which concerns religion and ecology, Chapter Seven shows how Tzu-chi employs Buddhist concepts to explain what environmental degradation and recycling means. The chapter argues that recycling is one of many intermediaries for the organization to achieve its religious goal of secularising Buddhism and revitalising Buddhism's social status in Taiwan. Chapter Eight emphasises the narrative tinged with other classical Chinese philosophical domains, namely Confucianism and Daoism. It proposes a conceptual scheme of 'ordered purity' to understand the representations of ideal environment/being in Tzu-chi's view. Instead of speaking of a nature/culture binary, Tzu-chi articulates a transcendent

view to connect mind, interpersonal relations, and physical organisms (the planet and human body). This chapter concludes that Tzu-chi's environmental discourse is a cultural product of the organisation's nostalgia to advocate traditional order.

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

As a whole, this dissertation contends that Tzu-chi recycling is a movement made possible through the enactment of nostalgia. In the cultural politics of nostalgia, the past is a resource for sentimental longing and utopian imagining, as well as a coping mechanism. In different forms of action and ways of seeing, Tzu-chi associated members, who represent a group of temporally homeless people in our contemporary society, redefine recycling as a past-oriented strategy and a redemptive tool to deal with different consequences that modernity entails. In the process, what Tzu-chi recycling 'recycles' alongside discarded materials are those of outdated labour and skills, an aged population, an abdicative religious worldview, and traditional morality and social mechanisms. Accordingly, this dissertation argues that the phenomenon of Tzu-chi recycling itself is a manifestation of a societal system of value recovery, recycling 'the discarded past' of Taiwanese society.

Furthermore, the dissertation ultimately illustrates that, instead of being an incidental ephemera of society's productive activities, rubbish matter is at the core of meaningful and coordinated social activity; it makes us who we are. 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 as well as its grand, nostalgic project of reproducing traditionality.

More specifically, the dissertation demonstrates that the Tzu-chi recycling movement happened in a historical conjecture of waves of drastic social change in Taiwan in the 1990s and 2000s. It is a result of the political economic moment of post-industrial Taiwan, its demand for waste solutions, and its abandonment of labour when industry transferred from manual manufacturing to high-technological production. Moreover, Tzu-chi recycling strategically takes advantage of the uneven political moment of post-authoritarian Taiwan and its craving for local identity in communal settings, when political force dispersed

from the central to the local, creating space for religious forces to take part in secular engagements.

The dissertation further explains how Tzu-chi recycling works by suggesting three key mechanisms: community-based operation, dependency on non-commissioned individual volunteers, and institutional support from the headquarters. First, the assembly of waste materials accompanies with the assembly of people. Grounded in the concreteness of everyday life and knowing the place, Tzu-chi recycling communities become hubs for cultivating local identity and solidarity. Relying on reciprocal mechanism of social exchange, material resources are converted into social, political and economic ones and vice versa. Second, the non-commissioned local volunteers are the mainstay of Tzu-chi recycling. All waste works are performed using the free labour of the volunteers, who mostly are with histories as atypical, manual workers. The working characteristics and surroundings of Tzu-chi recycling depict a typical working environment familiar to volunteers, which makes the station a community centre that functions as an alternative geriatric destination with welfare services. Third, although Tzu-chi recycling communities operate rather locally and independently, there is the institutional disposition – the administration team at the headquarters, the laity's communication network and the discursive representations – functions as an overarching supporting system that connects dispersed Tzu-chi recycling communities with shared identities and motifs.

