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'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

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Issue Date: 2021-09-08

Curriculum Vitae

Yun-an Olivia Dung 董芸安 (1986) is a doctoral researcher at the Institute for Area Studies at Leiden University, the Netherlands. She received a B.A. degree in sociology from National Taipei University in 2010, and an MSc degree in sociology from Erasmus University Rotterdam in 2012. Dung co-founded the international knowledge platform and membership-based association – Oranje Express 荷事生非 – in 2011, and operated as the chief executive officer since then. She has been appointed as a guest lecturer to teach BA courses in 2021 semester for the International College of Innovation at National Chengchi University. Her public writing and speeches cover a range of topics, including knowledge communication, intimate relationships, and waste. Overall, her intellectual interest lies in exploring cultural-sociological implications of contemporary society. Dung's next project is a collaboration to create an online political action platform that integrates knowledge contribution with crowdfunding.

Propositions

'Recycling the Past' : Tzu-chi Waste Recycling and the Cultural Politics of Nostalgia in Taiwan

Yun-An Olivia Dung

1. The sociological significance of waste recycling not only lies in its economic nature and environmental connotation, but also in its affective affordance, political opportunity, and cultural implication.
2. In the cultural politics of nostalgia, the past is a resource for sentimental longing and utopia imagining, as well as for developing instrumental mechanism in face of drastic social changes. Individuals and groups of people are mobilised to take action because of this relationship with their past.
3. The enactment of nostalgia takes place in Tzu-chi at three levels: individual, communal, and institutional. In different ways of seeing which give rise to different ways of relating oneself to the past, in Tzu-chi, the volunteers and associated members use recycling as a past-oriented strategy and a redemptive tool to deal with different consequences of modernity.
4. In Tzu-chi, the discarded objects, labour and skills of recycling, the social network of waste work, and related environmental narratives are the emblem of the participants' nostalgic past.
5. Rubbish matter is at the core of meaningful and coordinated social activity; it makes us who we are.
6. Waste redemption is often made possible by a structural alignment of the redeemable.
7. Being honest with data, i.e. to follow what one (unexpectedly) finds, is not only a matter of research ethics, but also a manner of courage, curiosity and a requirement of time to embrace the unknown and even the unwelcomed.
8. The experience of studying a 'local' issue in a 'foreign' setting in the time of academic globalization changes the question of *who* is self and *who* is the other into that of *when* is self and *when* is the other.
9. If doing research is to engage in an intimate relationship with knowledge, then conducting a PhD study is an experience of cohabitation status to have a taste of (yet not promised) lifetime partnership/marriage.

This dissertation investigates the relationship between waste recycling and social change. Instead of complying with a prevailing notion of recycling as an environmental solution, or as material conversion and trade, this research maintains that recycling is about people, their relation to objects and environments, their networks of interaction and modes of thoughts.

The empirical focus of this dissertation is Tzu-chi recycling: a volunteer-operated, community-based, Buddhism-associated national movement in Taiwan since the 1990s. This research analyzes Tzu-chi recycling at three levels: individual, communal and institutional. It studies Tzu-chi recycling against the backdrop of Taiwan's drastic social change: the economic and demographic restructuring, a movement of political localization, and the dynamic powers of religious phenomenon. By doing so, the dissertation shows post-authoritarian Taiwan through the lens of waste recycling, and understands waste recycling through Taiwan. Overall, it contends that in different forms of action and ways of seeing, Tzu-chi-associated members redefine recycling as a past-oriented strategy and a redemptive tool to deal with different consequences of modernity.

From the vantage point of waste, this research sheds light on the entanglement between a society's development and its waste as an examination of its continuum and rupture between present and past. Through the chapters of this dissertation, it becomes clear that, above all, rubbish is at the core of meaningful and coordinated social activity; it makes us who we are.

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