

## Productive Golden Years

Written by Chen Mei-y  
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There are more than 67,000 Tzu Chi recycling volunteers in Taiwan. Many of them are elderly with no formal education. But when it comes to sorting recyclables, even younger volunteers with advanced college degrees can't compare to these older volunteers. These stewards of the Earth give of themselves cheerfully and make good use of their retirement by collecting and reclaiming reusable resources. Their work reduces garbage and pollution and fills their lives with a strong sense of value and purpose. A better, cleaner world for the generations that follow will be their enduring legacy.

At 4:30 a.m., Lu Wang Jin-huan (王金娟) walks briskly into the recycling station at the Tzu Chi Guandu Complex in Taipei, northern Taiwan. She is a recycling volunteer and comes to the station every day to "tear things apart." She rips page after page out of discarded books and periodicals and sorts them into piles. Colored pages go into one basket, black-and-white into another, and those that cannot be torn or ripped go into yet another.

By six, the sun is already high in the sky in Kaohsiung, southern Taiwan. Leaning on a walking stick, Mrs. Xu arrives at the Tzu Chi Xishe Recycling Station. After saying hello to the volunteers that are already there, she sits down on a small wooden chair and begins taking apart audio- and videotapes. The copper, steel, and plastic components are recyclable; the magnetic tapes are not, so they end up in the trash.



By eight, A-qiao has cleaned up the breakfast table and hung out the washing in Yunlin, central Taiwan. Her son, daughter-in-law, and grandkids have already left for work and school. When she is finished with the household chores, she hops on her old bicycle and rides to the Douliu recycling station. Once there, she puts on a face mask and a pair of gloves and immediately sets to work sorting through piles of PET bottles, metal cans, and paper beverage containers.

In big cities or remote rural villages, high in the mountains or down at the seaside, Tzu Chi recycling volunteers can be seen everywhere in Taiwan. Twenty years ago, Master Cheng Yen, the founder of Tzu Chi, began calling upon people to do recycling work to protect the environment. Since then, countless people have joined in as Tzu Chi recycling stations sprang up one after another all over Taiwan.

A large majority of the volunteers are quite advanced in age. They pick up discarded bottles and cans along roads and alleys, collect used cardboard boxes from marketplaces and factories, and they even dig through trash piles to look for "treasures."

For these elderly volunteers, recycling enables them to contribute to a healthier environment

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and fills them with a sense of purpose and fulfillment. In the worthy cause of environmental protection, they have found a rewarding paradise in their golden years.

### A meaningful path

“I worked really hard to make a living before I retired,” said Jin-huan, 77. “I looked forward to a more leisurely lifestyle when I retired. Little did I know that life would be even harder when I was at loose ends and had nothing to do all day.” Jin-huan was in the wholesale seafood business before she retired and was accustomed to being busy. Once she stopped working, she found she was like a machine that had been left idle too long—she felt as if she were rusting.

Seeing how dispirited she was, her son suggested that she volunteer at a local temple. She took his advice, but soon found an even better place to be—the recycling station at the Tzu Chi Guandu Complex.

However, her son was strongly opposed to the idea. He feared SARS epidemic had hit Taiwan, and he was worried that she would be exposed to the disease on her trips out of the house. After two months of tug-of-war over the issue, Jin-huan still insisted on going. She even rented a small apartment in Guandu so she could be closer to the station. Her determination finally won over her son.



“My son was really concerned about me. He and my daughter-in-law often dropped by the station and pulled surprise inspections to see if I was wearing a face mask [as a safety precaution against SARS],” Jin-huan said with a laugh.

She has been volunteering for seven years now and rarely takes a day off. Her retired friends are engaged in more “traditional” retirement activities: sightseeing tours, dancing, or singing karaoke. However, she derives more pleasure from doing recycling than those other pastimes. “Don’t look down on the seemingly simple task of sorting recyclables. You get to exercise your body and your brain at a recycling station. If you don’t pay attention, you’ll easily make mistakes.”

Jin-huan is very satisfied with her life now. “Life can be miserable if you have no purpose or goal. When I go out with my friends, I often hear that so-and-so has checked into a hospital, or so-and-so has passed away. But, I’m actually getting healthier by doing recycling. Even better, I’ve found a meaningful path to follow in my retired life.”

A-chun, 78, is another Tzu Chi recycling volunteer. She is an early riser, like Jin-huan. She gets up at five every morning and goes to work as a cleaner at a medical clinic for two hours. Afterwards, she hops on a bus to the recycling station. “I just work at the clinic for some pocket money, so I don’t need to take any money from my children.” Actually, her children take very good care of her, and they also volunteer at the station on weekends.

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“I’m the only one at home during the day,” A-chun said. “Before I volunteered at the recycling station, I’d just sit around the house and watch TV. I often caught myself dozing off in front of the television set.” That was how bored she was. At home, time hung heavy on her hands. “But here at the recycling station, I’ve got lots of company. We work and chat, and time just flies by.”



Everyone is afraid of being lonely, a feeling that is even more acute among the elderly. Many seniors also tend to feel unimportant and useless after retirement. “Am I unnecessary?” is a nagging question that pops into their minds now and then. Volunteering at a recycling station and sorting recyclables into one neat pile after another makes them feel useful and needed. Many even claim that doing recycling has cured all their little ailments.

### Friendship among the volunteers

Lin Xia (林霞) has trouble hearing and used to be in poor health. All day long she felt weak and weary. When her younger sister Lin Su-zi (林素子), who had just moved back to Taiwan after a long sojourn in Japan, visited her and saw how lethargic she was, she decided to take her to the Guandu recycling station to help with some easy work. At the station, Xia received a lot of care from the other volunteers. By and by, she began to smile more. She also became physically stronger and no longer looked so pale.

Realizing how much she was benefiting from the recycling work, she took her husband to the station. Now the couple works side by side, enjoying their new roles as guardians of the Earth.

Lin Xia-hui (林霞惠)—no relation to Lin Xia—has a large frame and a big voice. Now 72 years old, she lives in Sanchong, more than an hour by bus from the recycling station. Every day, she dons a backpack, grabs her walking stick, and commutes to work at the station. In addition to sorting recyclables, she also cuts hair for other volunteers. “I was apprenticed to a barber when I was 16,” she explained. “Later I opened my own barber shop. Now that I’m old, I serve as a volunteer. Tomorrow I’ll bring my barber tools here and cut hair for the male volunteers.”

Xia-hui offers her skills to the other volunteers. Others bring food they make themselves. Preserved fruit, iced tea for hot summer days, fried rice cakes—these treats are often seen at the station.

It feels good for these seniors to have the company of the other volunteers. They feel a sense of belonging at the station. Huang Hui-zhen (黃惠珍), another volunteer, is often touched by the friendships she sees at the station. “Though we all have tempers and little frictions between us are inevitable, we don’t dwell on those. We watch Master Cheng Yen’s daily talks on TV, and that helps us reflect on our behavior. So we are less likely to get petty or angry over little things.”

### A day-care center for the elderly

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