

“Purity at the Source”: Tzu Chi’s Organizational and Communal Storytelling about Recycling and Vegetarianism

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Abstract

This chapter investigates the environmental storytelling practices of the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation (Tzu Chi), an international charity organization partly committed to environmental causes. Adopting the perspective of organizational storytelling, we analyze narratives surrounding vegetarianism and recycling, two primary objectives of Tzu Chi’s “Purity at the Source” campaign in China. Utilizing participant observation, in-depth interviews, and textual analysis, we explore the stories told and retold at both macro and micro levels. Our findings indicate that storytelling regarding recycling is more prevalent than that of vegetarianism. However, both narratives stem from a shared belief system that justifies initiatives related to recycling and vegetarianism in environmental terms, while simultaneously highlighting the commitment of Tzu Chi volunteers as role models for others.

Keywords: China, digital media, volunteers, community building, Buddhism

Introduction

On a warm Sunday afternoon in early November 2023, over twenty individuals, including volunteers from the Buddhist Tzu Chi Charity Foundation (慈济基金会; Tzu Chi hereafter), several older adults in uniform vests affiliated with the municipal volunteer association, and a dozen residents, assembled in the meeting room of a residents’ committee office in Shanghai. While some participants took a break and sipped tea after an hour and a half of recycling activities, a Tzu Chi volunteer in a blue and white uniform invited a boy and a girl to the front to perform a song in sign language, beginning with the lyrics, “Leave our children a clean Earth.” The volunteer then turned on a projector and commenced a PowerPoint presentation on “Purity at the Source: Tzu Chi Environmental Protection Education.” Finally, those present took turns reading aloud paragraphs from the book *Co-existing with the Earth* by Dhamma Master Cheng Yen who founded Tzu Chi in Taiwan in 1966.

This environmental learning session seamlessly integrated formal, almost ritualistic elements with informal exchanges, serving both educational and social bonding purposes while also being entertaining. The conversation among the participants in the session could be considered a typical kind of “meeting-room talk” (Van Hulst and Ybema 2020). During the session, the storytellers—mostly volunteers—recounted some of Tzu Chi’s enduring stories. One notable example was the retelling of Master Cheng Yen’s speech about “using the hands you applaud me with to recycle.” Additionally, stories about the dedication of the volunteers at the Neihu Recycling Station in Taipei were shared by playing a video clip from Tzu Chi’s official television channel, Da Ai (大爱) TV. The session also highlighted local anecdotes created by the small group, and both the Tzu Chi volunteers and local residents expressed their gratitude to Mrs. Chen, the party secretary of the Residents’ Committee, for her efforts in establishing this small recycling station in the neighborhood.

This chapter focuses on environmental “storytelling” in Tzu Chi as a way to enhance our understanding of the beliefs and everyday environmental protection practices within this global religious organization. The chapter is mainly based on research done at Tzu Chi’s China-based branches, and we analyze and discuss the interplay between global and local storytelling systems, the state-NGO relationship in China, and the potential of social media to facilitate storytelling and community engagement. Local forms of storytelling in Tzu Chi occur in various settings, such as recycling sites, public events, and social media platforms like WeChat groups and Moments. Beyond the local context, the organization has built a comprehensive and extensive storytelling network at the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels. This network aims to reach a diverse audience, including volunteers, residents, and the general public. Tzu Chi volunteers often refer to their environmental activities as “*zuo huanbao*” (做环保), which means “carrying out environmental protection” (Dung 2021, 67). However, the practice of *zuo huanbao*, we argue, encompasses much more than just “doing”; it also involves “saying” or “telling stories.” Storytelling is an integral component of Tzu Chi’s environmental initiatives, enhancing the identity of its members, mobilizing volunteers, and engaging the community.

Stories can “open valuable windows into the emotional, political, and symbolic lives of organizations” (Gabriel 2000, 2). Drawing on the theoretical perspectives of organizational storytelling (Boje 1991; Gabriel 2000) and communication infrastructure (Ball-Rokeach, Kim, and Matei 2001; Kim and Ball-Rokeach 2006), this chapter presents a case study of Tzu Chi’s storytelling practices regarding environmental issues. Through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and textual analysis, we examine the stories being told and retold at both macro- and micro-levels. We analyze how storytellers use legacy and social media to engage their audience and explore the implications of these storytelling practices; and we conclude with

some reflections on the challenges that remain for religious organizations using storytelling as a means to promote civic engagement in environmental work.

Background and the Framework of Storytelling

Tzu Chi is a transnational Buddhist charity organization founded and led by the charismatic nun Dhamma Master Cheng Yen (Weller et al. 2018; Huang 2009). It is a significant part of the humanistic Buddhism movement in Taiwan (Madsen 2008; Greene 2020) that seeks to cultivate inner purity while outwardly practicing Bodhisattva ideals (Tzu Chi 2020a). On a global stage, it is one of the most prominent "religious non-governmental organizations," which refers to "formal organizations whose identity and mission are self-consciously derived from the teachings of one or more religious or spiritual traditions and which operate on a nonprofit, independent, voluntary basis to promote and realize collectively articulated ideas about the public good at the national or international level" (Berger 2003, 15). Over the years, it has developed a distinct set of Buddhist practices prioritizing "social activism to provide disaster, poverty, and medical relief to alleviate human suffering, rather than seeking personal religious salvation" (Yang and Huang 2021, 69).

In addition to charity, medicine, education, humanistic culture, and disaster relief, environmental protection is also one of Tzu Chi's core missions. This commitment is deeply intertwined with Tzu Chi's religious principles and teachings. For example, Dhamma Master Cheng Yen employs the Buddhist concept of karma to elucidate the causes of environmental degradation (Yang and Huang 2021). She has asserted, "We have created this karma (the climate disasters) together and must endure the retribution together," urging volunteers to "love the Earth with utmost sincerity." She emphasized that it is "their cultivation, their responsibility" and that "the best way to show their love is to protect the environment" (Tzu Chi 2018). Simultaneously, Tzu Chi's environmental concern is becoming more intertwined with the climate change discourse as a reaction to the growing incidence of natural disasters (Lee and Han 2015). Consequently, Tzu Chi has urged its "global volunteers" to "strive towards reducing their carbon footprint through vegetarianism and environmental efforts" to achieve its 2050 net-zero emissions goal (Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation 2023).

In the early 1990s, Tzu Chi began engaging in recycling activities, which aligned closely with the broader recycling movement in Taiwan (Dung 2021). More generally, Tzu Chi's environmental practice of recycling has both shaped and been shaped by Taiwan's sociopolitical and cultural landscape. For example, the Tzu Chi volunteers' recycling efforts have revitalized communal society by reintroducing what they see as past and more positive work ethics, better labor practices, and

stronger social interactions within neighborhoods (Dung 2021). After three decades, Tzu Chi's recycling initiative has evolved into a comprehensive, global endeavor. According to its latest annual report, it now operates 7,059 recycling stations or community recycling points and has 91,982 certified recycling volunteers in Taiwan (Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation 2023, 73). Globally, the organization operates 8,656 environmental protection stations and community sites in 21 countries and engages 104,314 volunteers dedicated to "taking action to protect the Earth" (Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation 2022, 55).

For Tzu Chi, recycling discarded materials is seen both as a way of creating a Pure Land and as a concrete means of extending the "life of material objects" (Dung 2021, 170; Yang and Huang 2021, 85). This practice embodies a religious connection to Mahayana Buddhist teachings, and echoes the Buddhist concept of "material reincarnation" (Dung 2021, 170, 173). Consequently, Tzu Chi's approach to environmental protection is conceived as a form of Buddhist environmentalism, which has "adapted and adjusted ancient Chinese Buddhist teachings and scriptures to formulate a new religio-environmental ontology" and provides "a living testament to the continued viability, perhaps even desirability, for transcendence in environmental efforts in a secular world" (Yang and Huang 2021, 95–96).

In everyday contexts, however, applying such religio-environmental ontology and translating Mahayana Buddhism into daily organizing practices (Brummans and Hwang, 2010) can be challenging. Tzu Chi therefore actively uses stories and the practice of storytelling as a means to mobilize volunteers and engage the public. The most prominent story regarding recycling has long been the "applauding hands" story mentioned earlier. It unfolds as follows: During a speech on an August evening in 1990, Master Cheng Yen, disturbed by the rubbish scattered across an open-air market she had passed, urged the audience to "use the hands that you applaud me with to pick up rubbish, sweep the streets, and do recycling so that we can turn our land into a Pure Land. By turning trash into gold, we can turn gold into loving hearts" (tzuchi.org.sg. n.d.). According to the story, the speech immediately inspired a twenty-four-year-old woman in the audience to start collecting waste paper in her neighborhood. This act then motivated many others to engage in community recycling throughout Taiwan, eventually sparking a nationwide movement.

This origin story of Tzu Chi's recycling efforts is frequently recounted in the organization's official publications. More importantly, as Dung (2021, 2) observed, it was "almost the standard opening of conversations" that the researcher had had with Tzu Chi commissioners when discussing the organization's history of recycling. Thus, this story is arguably the most "fabled narrative" (Dung 2021, 2) about Tzu Chi's environmental initiatives. It highlights the tributes paid to Master Cheng Yen's leadership and vision, and signifies Tzu Chi's recycling efforts as a "semi-spontaneous, self-motivated, and community-based movement" (Dung 2021, 2).

The story also produced one of Tzu Chi's most significant mantras, "turn trash into gold," which has been pivotal in the organization's attempts to mobilize recycling volunteers. According to the analysis of both media discourses and daily interactions among local Tzu Chi volunteers in Taiwan, this mantra serves as a tool for textualization, substantiation, and invocation across mass media, social media, and face-to-face communication (Brummans, Hwang, and Cheong 2020). Its presence in various organizational settings clearly demonstrates how the terse retelling of an inspirational story helps to perpetuate the organization's ethos and worldview.

Both the "applauding hands" story and the "turn trash into gold" mantra highlight Tzu Chi's identity as a "collective storytelling system in which the performance of stories is a key part of members' sense-making" (Boje 1991, 106). The theoretical perspective of organizational storytelling (Beigi, Callahan, and Michaelson 2019; Boje 1991, 2001; Czarniawska-Joerges 1998; Gabriel 1991, 1995, 2000) offers valuable insights and conceptual tools to understand "the preferred sense-making currency of human relationships among internal and external stakeholders" (Boje 1991, 106)—in this case, Tzu Chi.

In the organizational context, stories can be understood as "narratives through which events, at times major, at others trivial, become charged with symbolic significance" (Gabriel 1991, 857–58), or as an "oral or written performance involving two or more people interpreting past or anticipating experience" (Boje 1995, 1000). In either form, they play "a fundamental role in the creation and reproduction of organizational reality" (Mumby 1988, 18) and serve several critical functions, including sense-making, social control and resistance, forming individual and group identities, and facilitating knowledge sharing and learning (Fotaki, Altman, and Koning 2020). Additionally, stories are often imbued with strong emotions, making them integral components of organizational culture (Gabriel 2000).

There is an extensive body of literature on organizational storytelling, which cannot be fully reviewed in this chapter. (For a recent review, see Beigi, Callahan, and Michaelson 2019). It is sufficient to note that organizational storytelling enables researchers to access "deeper organizational realities, closely linked to their members' experiences" (Gabriel 2000, 2). However, this scholarship has several blind spots, including an oversight of the setting (Van Hulst and Ybema 2019) or context of the storytelling, insufficient attention to underrepresented groups in the organization and of competing organizational identities, and a need to address technological developments and social media storytelling (Fotaki, Altman, and Koning 2020).

In light of these challenges, this chapter will adopt a setting-sensitive approach to organizational storytelling to analyze the actual telling of stories, or the "storytelling in situ" (Van Hulst and Ybema 2020). This approach considers organizational

storytelling as a “situated activity” (Van Hulst and Ybema 2020, 366) embedded in specific organizational settings, defined as “the place- and time-bound contexts in which particular social-material practices with particular purposes occur” (Van Hulst and Ybema 2020, 367). Under this approach, stories and storytelling vary significantly across different settings within the organization, and each setting—whether it be meeting rooms, canteens, workstations, or closed-door rooms—combines story tellability, story triggers, story forms, and story work in its unique way (Van Hulst and Ybema 2020, 383).

First, we examine the Chinese context in which Tzu Chi operates and its impact on both macro- and micro-level forms of storytelling. Despite its religious origins and belief systems, Tzu Chi operates in an entirely non-political way, which has enabled it to expand its operations into both China and North Korea (King 2020). The environmental shift in China has provided strategic opportunities for environmental NGOs to survive and thrive (Yang 2005; Cooper 2006; Zeng, Dai, and Javed 2019) and contribute to the development of a green public sphere (Yang and Calhoun 2007). Tzu Chi volunteers have capitalized on these political opportunities in China to promote recycling and environmental education, securing official recognition and legitimacy (Chen and Hansen 2022). However, NGOs, particularly religious NGOs, must navigate the complexities of an authoritarian regime, maintaining a precarious relationship with the state. This dynamic has resulted in a form of embedded activism or embedded environmentalism (Ho 2001; Ho and Edmonds 2007).

Second, we explore both top-down and bottom-up storytelling arguing that storytellers actively utilize different media and story genres. They not only reproduce master narratives like the “applauding hands” story and the “turn trash into gold” mantra, but also creatively tell and circulate their own stories.

Finally, since Tzu Chi is a community and volunteer-based organization, our discussion extends from the organizational level to the community level, incorporating the dimension of communal storytelling into our inquiry. According to Ball-Rokeach and her colleagues (Ball-Rokeach, Kim, and Matei 2001, 392–93), storytelling processes, particularly in urban settings, enable individuals and groups to participate in communication activities that create both subjective and objective senses of belonging. Such processes of neighborhood storytelling can help to transform individuals from mere urban residents or dwellers into more active neighborhood members. By combining the study of organizational storytelling in Tzu Chi and the communication infrastructure in the local setting of Tzu Chi branches in China, we can explore Tzu Chi’s storytelling practices at both macro- and micro-levels, and within and beyond the organizational boundaries. This helps us understand how Tzu Chi works in China, seeking to engage their own members, volunteers, local community residents, and the general public.

Methods

This chapter focuses on the “Purity at the Source” (清淨在源头) campaign, which was launched by Tzu Chi in different countries and areas including China in early 2020 with two main objectives: promoting vegetarianism (加素) and reducing plastic usage (減塑), and we explore storytelling related to these two. The campaign is named after a book by Master Cheng Yen and underscores the clear religious connection between recycling practices and Mahayana Buddhist teachings (Dung 2021, 170).

Our empirical analysis begins with Tzu Chi’s macro-level storytelling through its official publications and other media. Tzu Chi has established a hybrid media system and comprehensive communication networks under the auspices of their Mission of Humanistic Culture. This includes legacy media such as magazine publications and their Da Ai TV station, as well as new media outlets, all serving as macro-level storytellers to “purify the human mind, pacify our society, help those who suffer, and rectify frenzied and chaotic acts” (Tzu Chi n.d.). The media system has also expanded to China, where Tzu Chi set up a verified Weibo account in May 2012 and later a WeChat public account. Since 2012 the Weibo account has published over 1,700 posts and attracted half a million followers.

For this article, we examined Tzu Chi’s official website and systematically reviewed its WeChat posts for promotion messages of the campaign and stories about vegetarianism and recycling. We also conducted participant observation and in-depth interviews to understand Tzu Chi’s storytelling about recycling and vegetarianism at the local level. Between January 2020 and July 2024, the two authors visited two local branches in Shanghai and Hangzhou. We participated in their activities, and after connecting with Tzu Chi volunteers, we joined three WeChat groups: one related to vegetarianism with around 190 users, one focused on recycling with two hundred members, and one centered on an outdoor environmental education event with over fifty members. As one of the authors (Chen) has been researching Tzu Chi’s environmental practices since 2020, this study also builds on previous research experience, including interviews.

“A Love for the Earth”: Storytelling about Recycling

The storytelling surrounding recycling, as exemplified by Tzu Chi’s “Purity at the Source” campaign, notably downplays religious ideals and elements to emphasize global concerns, such as climate change, and China’s national policy on garbage sorting. At the local level, grassroots volunteers, who serve as the primary storytellers, actively utilize social media to retell and adapt these macro-level

narratives. Simultaneously, they share their personal stories to create local role models, strengthen the bond among recycling participants, and foster a sense of compassion.

At the macro level, Tzu Chi integrates the campaign in China into its global narrative by recounting the origin story of its engagement in environmental protection. For instance, a news article covering the campaign's launch ceremony in a local neighborhood in Guangzhou characteristically begins with, "In 1990, Dharma Master Cheng Yen called for 'using applauding hands to protect the environment.'" This introduction to the local campaign immediately situates the current program within a longstanding tradition in Tzu Chi, reaffirming the organization's pioneering role in environmental protection.

Tzu Chi also aligns the program's "Reducing Plastic" objective with the Chinese state-initiated garbage sorting and recycling campaigns. In the news article, a local official in Guangzhou delivered a speech at the campaign's launch ceremony, commending Tzu Chi for guiding community residents in separating and recycling garbage. The official also urged everyone to take personal responsibility and collaborate to improve waste sorting. At the event, the local branch of Tzu Chi also prepared display boards about garbage sorting, introducing the government's system of a four-color classification scheme: green for food waste, blue for recyclables, and so on.

Importantly, from Tzu Chi's macro-level storytelling a master narrative has emerged that aligns with China's national policy on garbage sorting. Tzu Chi consciously collaborates closely with the local government and seeks to establish an extensive network of community volunteers who also work strictly according to the guidelines of the government, as demonstrated in the following story:

Every Saturday, [Tzu Chi volunteers] tirelessly advocate for waste recycling and environmental protection within the community. Their persistent efforts over the past eight years have gained recognition from community residents and strong support from the property management company. In appreciation, the company provided the volunteers with a ten-square-meter house and an adjacent fifteen-square-meter open-air garden, free of charge. The volunteers raised their own funds to renovate the house into a Tzu Chi environmental protection station. Since then, they have had a home within the community—a shelter from the wind and rain. (Tzu Chi 2020b)

Interestingly, this is a local story with unnamed protagonists. Nonetheless, it was solicited and shared by Tzu Chi's WeChat public account, which serves as a national platform for storytelling. Essentially, it is a local story with national implications, focusing on community engagement and bonding. Within China's political and ideological contexts, Tzu Chi employs discursive strategies such as downplaying

religious elements, aligning with state programs, and highlighting the positive impact on local communities in its macro-level storytelling to enhance the legitimacy of both the campaign and the organization.

Storytelling at the local level is not isolated from macro-level narratives and the broader context of communication action. As we have seen, local storytellers sometimes incorporate materials from the macro-level storytelling system into their own local stories and they also invite prominent figures featured in legacy media, particularly role models, to local events as special guests, facilitating the movement of stories from macro- to local-level settings.

For instance, on a Friday evening in mid-April 2024, the environmental learning session of the local recycling group in Shanghai invited Teacher-Sister Ming Qiong to share her story of establishing recycling stations in Putian, Fujian. Her story has been covered by Tzu Chi's WeChat public account in China (Tzu Chi 2020b) and its official TV channel, Da Ai TV. After telling her story, Ming Qiong had the following exchange with the hosting volunteer:

- Teacher-Sister Lian Hua: You have to take care of two granddaughters. With so much work at home and the small diner for breakfast, how do you find time (for recycling)?
- Teacher-Sister Ming Qiong: I make full use of my sleeping hours. I sleep very little, sometimes only four hours a day. So, I use the time that others spend sleeping to *zuo huanbao*. When my granddaughter was little, I used to place her in a basket or sit her in front of me and take her along in my pedicab when I went recycling.

The vivid image of Ming Qiong placing her baby granddaughter into a basket also appears in Da Ai TV's coverage, which was shown at the end of the learning session. The interviewer had also pointed out that Ming Qiong was a true grassroots volunteer, an ordinary citizen who was dedicated beyond expectations and thus stood out as a model for others to emulate.

This story is one of many that highlights how Tzu Chi consciously and skillfully employs numerous forms of storytelling, both in the form of people telling stories directly to other people during in-person events, or using digital media, including video transfer, internet presentations, and broadcasts on their Da Ai TV station—a Taiwanese broadcast station that is restricted in China. Still, most of the storytelling at the local level involves people and events within the community. These stories are mostly about individual volunteers, and they often take the form of educational sessions where more experienced volunteers guide newcomers to gain the "correct" understanding of the recycling activities, as illustrated in the following

conversation between several volunteers during a recycling session. This was taken from a video clip uploaded by one of the volunteers to the WeChat Group:

- Teacher-Sister Xu Yu: I knew little about environmental protection. I knew we could collect and sell recyclables like cardboard to help those in need. I did not fully understand the genuine concern of environmental protection. The real problem is, uh, stop...
- Teacher-Sister A: Polluting the Earth
- Teacher-Sister Xu Yu: Uh, polluting the Earth. Be able to...
- Teacher-Sister B: Be able to use as little as possible.
- Teacher-Sister A: Teacher-Sister Xu Yu, you shared the story about the disposable gloves with me. Could you please tell it again?
- Teacher-Sister Xu Yu: One of our young women, when she uses chopsticks to cook food, the oil splashes on her hands, so she wears disposable gloves and throws them away when she is done using them. I said, "I can still use them after you finish; we can reuse them for washing clothes and cleaning." She replied, "There are plenty of them. We have several boxes at home." I stopped complaining, but whenever she throws them away, I pick them up for reuse ... it is also like these plastic bags (she is holding a black one). We do not need to recycle and reuse. We can use them repeatedly ... (looking toward Teacher-Sister B) What you shared was terrific; it resonated with me. (Now I understand) We are not recycling for money but to protect the environment.
- Teacher-Sister A: That is really great!

At first glance, this may not seem like a natural conversation. In reality, it was initiated by Teacher-Sister A, who prompted Teacher-Sister Xu Yu to share her thoughts on recycling and recount the story about the disposable gloves. As the conversation indicates, Teacher-Sister Xu Yu initially perceived recycling as a charitable activity. However, she then learned from the more experienced volunteers to view it from Tzu Chi's perspective of recycling as a practical and symbolic act of protecting the Earth. The exchange is educational for both Teacher-Sister Xu Yu and the other volunteers who were present.

Teacher-Sister A recorded the conversation by using a mobile phone. The footage was subsequently uploaded to the WeChat group, along with a paragraph summarizing and introducing the video clip: "Teacher-Sister Xu Yu once viewed recycling primarily as a way to make donations to schools. Now, she understands that environmental protection is motivated by a love for the Earth."

Thanks to information and communication technologies, particularly mobile devices and digital media, local storytelling is no longer a fleeting event. It can seamlessly transition from offline to online. On a Friday evening in late March 2024, Teacher-Sister Lian Hua posted the following message in the WeChat group:

I heard this story today: Teacher-Sister Fufan has a connection with a local barbershop. She asks the shop to save their paper, PET bottles, and plastic containers, which she collects daily or every other day. A girl named Mickey at the barber shop saves these items for her. Recently, Fufan has had to attend to some family matters. The young people at the barbershop were concerned that Fufan might become exhausted from collecting and washing those containers. To lighten her burden, they decided to throw away half of the plastic containers from takeaway food.

When Teacher-Sister Fufan found out, she told Mickey that if they wanted to leave her only one type of container, she would prefer the plastic ones. She explained that someone would pick up paper boxes for recycling (and earn money from it), but nobody would pick up plastic containers, which would eventually become dry garbage. She requested that they not throw away plastic containers in the future.

The story carries multiple layers of meaning and implications. It highlights Teacher-Sister Fufan's passion and commitment to environmental protection, and it depicts a close relationship among Tzu Chi volunteers, the young barbershop staff, and the wider community. The story also distinguishes Tzu Chi's broader societal vision from the commercial business which focuses more on the economic value of recyclables than on the environmental impact of waste. The moral message at the end—do not throw away plastic containers—reflects the main message that volunteers wish to convey to the community residents. Therefore, on hearing the story in a later online environmental learning session, Teacher-Sister Lian Hua shared it in the WeChat group and two days later, Teacher-Sister Fufan retold the story at the recycling site, and uploaded a new video clip to the WeChat group.

By producing and circulating such stories featuring local figures as protagonists, storytellers like Teacher-Sister Lian Hua and others make Tzu Chi narratives meaningful for both Tzu Chi volunteers and for local community members.

Food Speaks for Itself: Storytelling about Vegetarianism

Tzu Chi's macro-level storytelling on vegetarianism has evolved from emphasizing the Buddhist principle of "all living creatures are equal" (众生平等) to addressing concerns about the climate crisis. On the very first day of its inception, May 7, 2012,

Tzu Chi's Weibo account posted ten tweets. Among these was a touching story about a volunteer's journey to vegetarianism:

Chen Chiou-Hwa used to consume a great deal of meat, often splitting a whole chicken in half to share with others. However, after learning about Dharma Master Cheng Yen's teachings, which emphasize that all living creatures are equal in the first place (众生本平等), he changed his dietary habits. Nowadays, he frequently eats rice with peanuts. This significant shift in his lifestyle often moves his wife to tears.

The tweet includes a link to the full story on Tzu Chi's official website in Taiwan. It is written in traditional Chinese characters as normally used only in Taiwan and Hongkong, suggesting it was an exact copy of a message posted on Tzu Chi's Facebook page the previous day. It is an example of using Buddhist ideals to justify people's personal conversion to vegetarian diets.

In 2016, Tzu Chi launched a global campaign for vegetarianism, which retained some aspects of the organization's religious ideals, such as respecting all living beings, and, at the same time, placed a stronger emphasis on the positive environmental impacts of a vegetarian diet. January 11th was designated as a "global day of awareness that draws mindful attention to the impact our personal choices as a society can have on the environment, wildlife, and each other" (Tzu Chi USA n.d.). In Chinese, it was initially named "111, Global Day for Vegetarian Eating" (111, 全球茹素日) and later renamed "Vegetarian Awakening Day" (蔬醒日). As the name suggests, it signifies a day dedicated to vegetarianism using slogans like "vegetarianism can save the planet" and that "we can slow down global warming, starting with you and me" (Chen and Zhang 2016). As part of the global campaign, the Tzu Chi organization in Shanghai further utilized "111" to illustrate their objectives: "1 person, 1 meatless day, 1 Earth," aiming to make "'111' and 'vegetarian awakening' part of the global lexicon" (Tzu Chi 2017). In English, the proposed name of the day was Ethical Eating Day, which refers to "choosing a vegetarian diet and locally produced food because such personal choices prevent global warming and combat climate change" (Tzu Chi USA n.d.).

The campaign in Taiwan and China focused solely on promoting vegetarianism, whereas Tzu Chi USA expanded its agenda to include eating locally grown food, to align with the locavore movement of ethical eating in North America. Nonetheless, the main rationale behind the introduction of the global day of awareness of food consumption is the science that shows how a transition to plant-based diets and preference for locally produced seasonal food can significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions and thus help to slow global warming. At the same time, the campaign was based on the Buddhist principle that "all living creatures are equal." For instance, a pamphlet titled "Environmental Heart Map 5.0" circulated among the

Tzu Chi volunteers argues that vegetarianism offers three key benefits: mitigating climate change, improving human health, and fostering love and respect for animals and all living beings (Tzu Chi 2018).

In the "Purity at the Source" campaign, community-based recycling efforts and the personal choice of vegetarianism converge in the slogan, "Loving Earth by Going Vegetarian and Reducing Plastics." Tzu Chi has developed a specially designed WeChat applet for "daily attendance" (打卡) that encourages users to engage in environmentally friendly activities on a daily basis, including "sorting garbage," "eating everything on your plate," "reducing plastic usage," and "choosing a vegetarian diet." However, compared to the goal of reducing plastics, the vegetarian agenda was significantly downplayed in the overarching narrative of the campaign. In the previously mentioned WeChat article about the campaign's launching ceremony, all sign-language and drama performances, comments by local authorities, and on-site exhibitions focused exclusively on garbage sorting and recycling. Vegetarianism was mentioned only once, through a single picture showcasing a table full of delicious vegetarian dishes carefully prepared by the volunteers for the guests. The food seems to speak for itself, offering guests "a good taste of the beauty of 'going vegetarian'" (Tzu Chi 2020b). One reason for this downplaying might have been the difficulty in relating vegetarianism to any officially sanctioned national policy, such as garbage sorting.

The coverage of Teacher-Sister Ming Qiong's story (mentioned in the previous section) by Da Ai TV and on Tzu Chi's WeChat public account highlights a stark contrast in the visibility of recycling versus vegetarianism. In its prime-time program, Da Ai TV dedicated two and a half minutes to Teacher-Sister Ming Qiong, starting her environmental, "*zuo huanbao*" story with the following scene:

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|----------------------------|---|
| Teacher-Sister Ming Qiong: | I participate in environmental protection every day. I haven't taken a single day off. |
| Voiceover: | When Ming Qiong talks about environmental protection, she fully commits herself to the cause. The first step she took was to transform her family's breakfast dinner by eliminating meat from the menu. |
| Teacher-Sister Ming Qiong: | ... I convinced my husband to stop eating meat, explaining that a vegetarian diet is healthier. When he agreed, I was overjoyed and committed myself to a completely vegetarian lifestyle. |
| Voiceover: | Twenty years ago, Wu Ming Qiong moved to Taiwan for work. Following the Wenchuan Earthquake, she encountered Tzu Chi, which ignited her journey into environmental protection. |

The story then continues with Ming Qiong committing herself to recycling activities. A WeChat story titled “A Day Without Environmental Action Is a Day Reduced in Life” follows up on the story about Ming Qiong, but it does not mention the parts about conversion to a vegetarian menu but focuses exclusively on Ming Qiong’s recycling activities (Tzu Chi 2020c). Ultimately, Teacher-Sister Ming Qiong is portrayed solely as a role model for recycling.

Other examples of micro-level storytelling within the recycling group in Shanghai appears to follow the same pattern. Volunteers and community residents often enjoy fruits and vegetarian food when they take a break from recycling, but discussions about vegetarianism rarely emerge in either on-site conversations, the group chat, or other local forms of storytelling. The only exception occurred in late August 2024, when a volunteer posted a picture of a plate of well-packaged vegetarian dumplings along with the following message:

We are so grateful for Mama Du’s delicious food; it made us very happy! Members of our eco-friendly family ate with great joy. We are thankful for your love and care. Your feet must be numb from the hour-long bike ride back and forth—it’s really hard on you! We are truly touched by your efforts and deeply admire your care and support of the environmental protection volunteers. We appreciate the matchless charitable work you have done (功德无量)!

Other participants in the recycling session posted similar messages of gratitude. Collectively, they told the story of Mama Du, the mother of one of the core volunteers, who prepared vegetarian dumplings and mung bean lily soup at home and delivered them to the recycling station on her electric bicycle. While dumplings and soup were vegetarian, the actual focus of the story is actually the loving Mama Du, and the main thread of the narrative is the importance of showing parental support for children’s and family members’ environmental protection efforts—a concept of family which extends to other members of the recycling group. Vegetarianism, particularly its connection to environmental concerns, is assumed and kept in the background.

Our final example of storytelling in the “Purity at the Source” campaign happened at one of the environmental education events organized by Tzu Chi. These educational sessions constitute important sites for volunteers to create and share stories and, again, the two main areas of environmental concern, the importance of recycling and the benefits of vegetarianism, are foregrounded. For instance, in April 2024, a local branch of Tzu Chi in Hangzhou organized a six-hour outdoor environmental education event open to the public and focused on garbage pick-up and environmental advocacy. During this event, volunteers prepared a rich vegetarian lunch for all the participants. Before the meal commenced, the hosting volunteer invited the volunteers who had cooked to come forward and led the

group in applauding and singing in appreciation of their efforts. The participants then followed the other Tzu Chi volunteers in raising their thumbs in gratitude. The host explained how these dedicated volunteers had traveled from a distant city district early in the morning to prepare the meal.

As people queued for the buffet-style vegetarian food, they sang the "Gratitude Song," a short four-line piece that emphasizes the challenges of obtaining vegetarian food and encourages everyone to savor and appreciate it and be thankful to "all living creatures" (众生) with their whole hearts. After lunch, some volunteers invited the participants to share their reflections on the event in the seminar room. Some of the children expressed their delight with the delicious food and thanked the volunteers who cooked.

The event concluded with the distribution of gifts and vegetarian desserts. Each participant received a wooden ornament inscribed with the words, "Collective goodness of vegetarian food to protect the Earth" (蔬食共善护大地). Throughout and after the event, both volunteers and participants posted photos, videos, and comments on the WeChat group created specifically for the occasion. Reflecting on the vegetarian food provided, one volunteer noted that the meal was crafted with compassion and love for oneself, families, and the Earth.

At this particular educational event, vegetarianism seemed to be a crucial element. The volunteers made a concerted effort to emphasize the significance of vegetarianism, and much like Mama Du's story, the cooking volunteers' narratives revolved around themes of compassion and gratitude. These stories were aimed at underscoring the volunteers' dedication to the environmental cause, in hopes of inspiring a similar sense of compassion among the event's attendees. For the Tzu Chi volunteers and participants, expressing gratitude to volunteer cooks and others in the broader community may help motivate them to practice vegetarianism and cultivate compassion—this is at least the hope of the organizers in Tzu Chi. In terms of emotional impact, some of the participants expressed their gratitude and motivation to further involve in Tzu Chi's practices. However, it remains to be seen how such emotional impact can further transform participants' behavior in everyday life.

Conclusion

Similar to the "Purity at the Source" campaigns that were launched earlier in Taiwan and Singapore, the campaign in China was launched in early January 2020. In hindsight, the timing was unfortunate, as the COVID-19 pandemic erupted only weeks later. Consequently, most outdoor activities, including recycling, had to be suspended and resumed only after the pandemic subsided. Interestingly, in response

to the COVID-19 pandemic, Tzu Chi USA launched the Very Veggie Movement (VVM) in early 2020. This reflected that for Tzu Chi, the connection between COVID-19 and the Huanan Wet Market “amplified the case for vegetarianism,” and “what began as a wake-up call through the emergence of COVID-19 has now turned into a dietary revolution” (Shatursun 2021, 34). Adopting a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle is believed by Tzu Chi to “save millions of animals every year,” “reduce the environmental impact of animal farming,” and “minimize the outbreak of the next animal-borne disease” like SARS and COVID-19 (VVM n.d.). Although we observed how the Tzu Chi volunteers associated vegetarianism with COVID-19 to promote vegetarianism, we have not come across messages related to the US-based Very Veggie Movement in either Tzu Chi’s official discourse or local-level storytelling.

Although environmental work, or “*zuo huanbao*” was largely suspended during the COVID-19 pandemic, Tzu Chi’s many forms of storytelling continued through both legacy and social media and at the macro- and micro-levels. In this chapter, we employed the perspective of organizational storytelling to explore Tzu Chi’s stories about and storytelling on recycling and vegetarianism in particular. Building on previous analyses of Tzu Chi’s official discourse and the power of origin stories and simple mantras, we examined the dynamics of storytelling with a particular focus on local storytellers and their practices in various settings. This exploration aimed to understand the interplay between the global and the local, the macro and the micro.

As the analysis indicates, storytellers at various levels generate a diverse range of stories; some are brief, while others are more comprehensive with clear beginnings, middles, and ends. Notable differences exist between the stories and storytelling practices related to recycling and vegetarianism. Storytelling about recycling, both at the macro and micro levels, is more prevalent than that of vegetarianism. This disparity likely arises from the absence of national policies or programs specifically addressing vegetarianism, unlike those for garbage sorting and reducing plastic use, which provide a framework for recycling-related stories. Moreover, for Tzu Chi and its volunteers, adopting a vegetarian diet is largely a personal choice tied to self-cultivation, making crafting and sharing stories about vegetarianism more challenging.

However, this does not mean there are no commonalities or ties between the two sets of stories. Both derive from a shared belief system. Regardless of the content of the stories, they convey similar messages and meanings with practical and moral implications. First, both macro- and micro-level storytelling justify initiatives and actions related to recycling and vegetarianism in environmental terms. Second, due to the political and ideological context, storytelling at both levels downplays religious messages but, at the same time, emphasizes the leadership and vision of Dharma Master Cheng Yen. Third, a common theme in most stories is the commitment of Tzu Chi volunteers as role models for others, including both Tzu Chi

members and ordinary residents, as well as their compassion for the community and the wider world.

Our case study also offers general insights into religious NGOs, with implications for other similar organizations, and demonstrates the potential of a storytelling perspective. Conceptually, we can distinguish between macro-level discourse and micro-level storytelling practices. However, these are not isolated but closely intertwined. The macro level provides symbolic resources for the micro level, while the micro level substantiates master narratives in everyday life and practices. At the micro level, the storytellers, primarily volunteers, actively engage in storytelling. They not only reproduce and appropriate macro-level stories but also create their own, featuring volunteers and local residents as protagonists to tell stories about their neighborhood. The media play an essential role in both macro- and micro-level storytelling. Tzu Chi has established a sophisticated media system, also in China, over the past decades, and local storytellers actively utilize devices such as mobile phones, as well as platforms like WeChat groups and Tencent Meetings, navigating between physical and virtual spaces. This is largely attributable to the widespread use of information and communication technologies, social media, and the media literacy and tech-savvy capabilities of the participants.

For Tzu Chi's commissioners and volunteers, storytelling offers practical guidance that informs their actions. More importantly, it strengthens their identity and fosters emotional bonds among them. For neighborhood residents, storytelling serves an educational purpose, particularly in teaching how to achieve "purity at the source" by reusing disposables or adopting vegetarian diets. Additionally, it is performative, showcasing the commitment of Tzu Chi volunteers and their connection with the local community.

However, despite efforts by local storytellers to involve residents in their narratives, many of those in the WeChat group—especially those who do not participate in recycling but provide recyclables for volunteers—often remain silent during conversations and storytelling sessions. This silence indicates that fostering neighborhood storytelling and civic engagement in China remains a challenging task.

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