

Foreigners Marvel at Tzu Chi Recycling center in Taiwan

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A group of 45 foreigners visited a recycling center run by the Tzu Chi Foundation at Neihu, northern Taiwan and marveled at what they saw. They could scarcely believe that elderly people gave up much of their time to sort waste paper and plastic bottles.

The 45, from Europe, Africa and Central and South America, were invited by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for a 12-day tour of Taiwan to experience its society and culture. They included young people, government officials and members of charity and Chinese study groups. The tour, 'Discovering Taiwan', aimed to help them learn more about the island's history, culture, ecology, environmental protection, technology, politics, economy, public health and cross-straits relations.

On July 7th, 45 members of the group, accompanied by 23 Taiwanese college students with majors related to European Union, visited the Tzu Chi Recycling and Educational Center in Neihu, to help them understand better how recycling is practiced in Taiwan. They took part in a workshop in which each participant was taught to sort garbage and make eco-green blankets. The group was divided into two teams, with translation volunteers from Tzu Chi leading the team and giving a commentary during the tour. They saw a group of physically and mentally disabled volunteers who come to the recycling center every Thursday to help by squeezing plastic bottles. Two of the visitors, Martha from Nigeria and Gmilova from Germany, asked at the same time: "why are they stepping on those plastic bottles?" After hearing the explanation from the volunteers, they responded with surprise: "Oh, I see! To minimize the volume of waste."



When each group went to the paper-recycling zone, everyone stared at the volunteers and wondered why they were cutting the wasted paper. "Why makes it so complicated to recycle papers?" they asked. "How come there are elder volunteers and teenage students working together here? Don't they have classes? Where does the money go to after selling this paper?" Cheng Chang-Fong, the volunteer who was translating, answered that they were cutting off the white section to reduce the amount of paper to throw into the bleaching process during the recycling: this also helps to minimize the environmental pollution. The money from recycling goes to Tzu Chi's Da Ai (Great Love) Television Station, which is a charity and has no commercial income.

The recycling center is the best nursing home for elderly people. Many come to volunteer instead of watching television all day at home. They feel calm and peaceful: it makes them feel that life is worth living and they are happy to work here every day. During the summer vacation, teenage students choose to do recycling here instead of staying at home. The recycling

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volunteers found it easy to answer every question from the visitors. "Some volunteers are already 70 or 80 years old," one replied proudly. All of the visitors were astonished by the elderly volunteers and expressed their deep respect for them.

Martha, a volunteer from Nigeria, was amazed to see one volunteer, Wu Yue-ying, make clothes using fragments of plastic bottles, polyester chips, drawing tannin and pieces of fabric: "you can make the clothes and blankets from fragments of plastic bottle? That is impossible. And the quality is amazingly impressive". "That is correct," Ms Wu replied through the translator. "All these clothes, blankets, hats, socks and so on are made from those recycled plastic bottles." She also said there was one wall inside the center, of which half of the materials were recycled plastics and bottle caps: this wall is water-proof and eco-friendly.



Martha could not wait to bring everything she learnt during this visit back to her country. She would not believe what she had seen unless she was here in person. She thought it amazing that elderly volunteers were recycling in extremely hot weather, together with teenage students and people with regular jobs. It was incredible that people were willing to devote themselves to charity. After the interview, she asked the volunteers for the Foundation's web site. For her, two hours was not enough to learn everything about Tzu Chi. When she returns home, will be able to browse the Net on how it does recycling and charity.

Julija, a girl from Latvia, who knows a little Chinese, said with surprise: "Taiwan is a high-tech country, so why are they still recycling manually? Elderly people should enjoy their lives after retirement, students should concentrate on studies and people could spend more time with their families. Why spend time on volunteering work?" she asked. "Young people in my country seldom volunteer. They all have to work for a living". In response, tour volunteer Lin Cheng-Yun said: "people are doing recycling here not because of money. This recycling center serves as a temple to purify our mind and heart, to bring peace to society and further reduce disasters in the world."

The tour enabled the visitors to become more familiar with the Tzu Chi Foundation, which is little known in foreign countries. Tzu Chi encourages everyone to come and learn. Hopefully these new friends from different countries and diverse backgrounds learnt well enough to introduce these new experiences to others.

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