

## Tzu Chi Delivers Winter Aid to Thousands Across China

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation  
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Each year, before the Chinese New Year, Tzu Chi volunteers go to poor and remote districts of China to deliver food, clothes and blankets and help people through the winter. Their help is greatly appreciated. We look at the aid operations in four provinces – Fujian, Yunnan, Guizhou and Sichuan.

Since 1996, volunteers have been delivering aid each year to the poor and needy in Fuding city in Fujian province, southeast China. This year, 2010, they distributed the goods to 9,129 households, or 14,542 people in 13 townships, between January 14 and 16. They organized the program in co-operation with Fuding Hospital, which has a close link with the foundation; it donated a multi-storey building to the hospital and has inspired many of its staff to work as volunteers. So local volunteers played an important part in the aid program. Doctors from the hospital, as well as from Taiwan, took part in the distribution.

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### **The Tzu Chi spirit takes root in Fuding**

Before people arrived to receive the goods, the volunteers prepared hot tea and bread to help them fight the cold weather. Some walked a long way. They also made ready tubs of petroleum jelly, which people used to rub their hands and make their cracked skin soft and supple. One care recipient even donated a basket of fresh mountain produce. “One elderly man bought taro and pumpkin from the mountain,” said volunteer Xu Xuezhi. “He said that he wanted to give them to us. We told him we were very grateful. He said that it was a small gesture on his part, so we can see the villagers here are very blessed and also know how to count their blessings.”

One man always turned his head to one side, because the right half of his face is disfigured by a tumor. When the doctors saw something that needed treatment, they stepped forward. One woman had severely deformed ankles. One Taiwan doctor knelt before her to see what could be done. “This needs an x-ray, a check to see how the joints are moving and a nerve test,” said one volunteer. “These three things need to be done.” They also conducted home visits. During one of them, they met a 33-year-old man who shook uncontrollably and could not stand up without help; he needs medication to control his condition. He is a dedicated reader, which gives him a window on the world and an outlet for his mind. “You are wonderful,” said one of the visiting volunteers. “You sit here and study all the time. We all need to learn from you. I am too lazy to read. When I go home, I will have to change my ways and should read more books.”

The visiting volunteers feel a deep affinity with Fuding and its kind-hearted people. One of them, Xu Xuezhi, said that, during the three days of distribution, he had seen the thorough preparation work done by the local volunteers. “It helped us 20 or so volunteers from Taiwan to get on board very quickly. So, first and foremost, they did a very thorough job.” Chen Ziyong, superintendent of the Taichung Tzu Chi Hospital, also praised the local volunteers for their organization. “For our part, I think we provide back-up and support.”

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In addition to this large-scale distribution in urban areas of Fuding, the volunteers also provided care to people in mountainous districts. It is one of the ten largest tea-producing cities in China; the mountain areas are full of lush tea plantations that are the economic base of the city. But not everyone shares in the prosperity of the tea industry. The volunteers made a special journey to the village of Jiadang in Jiayang township and the home of 74-year-old Zheng Jiliang, which is a simple house made of rocks and thatch. He first came to their attention at a free clinic in 2005, when they discovered that he had injured his right eye while working; without proper treatment and no-one to care for him at home, his condition has worsened. When he attended a free clinic in 2008 jointly held by Tzu Chi and the Fuding Hospital, the volunteers found that, in addition, he had skin cancer; they put him on their long-term care list.

Reaching Zheng's home was a major journey. Since there is no access by road, the volunteers had to walk up a rocky trail, carrying the tools and building materials they were to use. During the hike, conversations died down, to be replaced by a shortness of breath. Their mission was to replace Zheng's decrepit roof. They removed the layers of grass, waterproof matting and fraying tarpaulin and soon stripped the roof bare. Seeing their work, villagers came to help. Next, they cut and fashioned bamboo stalks – harvested only a stone's throw from house – to fortify the frame of the roof. The villagers are adept at this work; when they saw a cut, they patched it quickly and put it in place. Then they placed back the tarpaulin and a second layer of covering that is more water-proof. The two sheets were then fixed with bamboo slats – a necessary step to strengthen the roof against typhoons. What was left of the tarpaulin was used to insulate the house from the cold. While some volunteers repaired the roof, other tidied his house. The old man sat on the side, enjoying the milk and bread volunteers had brought for him. When he walked back into his renovated house, he was moved and could not find the words to express his gratitude. The love from volunteers and his neighbors was a heartwarming re-assurance of the support he can draw up in his solitary life.

Master Cheng Yen feels especially close to the doctors and nurses of the Fuding Hospital, who have taken to heart her ideals and practices, treating the spirit as well as the body of their patients. "When I see them, I feel that they are not far and our hearts are joined together," she said in her morning talk in Hualien on February 19. "On the first day of the Chinese New Year, the doctors and nurses gave fruit to the patients and their family members and asked warmly about them. The local volunteers are like those in Taiwan, visiting each nursing desk to show their concern for the staff. The medical care and humanity of the Fuding Hospital never falters for a moment, in saving life and protecting health and protecting love."



### Poverty in the midst of plenty

While volunteers were active in Fuding, others were performing a similar service in another corner of China – the city of Kunming, capital of the southwest province of Yunnan. Kunming's nickname is the 'spring city' because it enjoys the best climate in China and is one of the

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country's biggest producers of flowers. Yunnan has a greater variety of plants than any other province in China. But the people who received the foundation's aid are the blameless victims of an environmental disaster that has befallen the Dian lake, close to Kunming. It has become so polluted by industrial and domestic waste that its water no longer meets drinking standards. The government was forced to switch the supply of water to the four million residents of Kunming from the lake to an upstream region of the Panlong river which flows into the lake; it built the Songhua dam and reservoir, which cut the flow of the Panlong, and declared nearby villages 'water conservation areas'. This means severe restrictions on the economic activities of the residents – a ban on raising livestock and using chemical fertilizers on their crops. In addition, the government has banned tourism and industrial development. This has made life even harder for people who were already poor. The foundation picked two of the villages in this 'conservation' area, Zhuyuan and Dashao, for its distribution this winter.

"Our villagers say that, of all the restrictions, the one banning chemical fertilizer for vegetables is the worst," said Ding Xueqing, secretary of Zhuyuan village. "The area for vegetable farming is restricted and the government has issued an order banning the cultivation of flowers and vegetables in 2012." This leaves farmers with potatoes and turnips as the only crops they can grow and sell. They also grow cornmeal, their staple diet. To make matters worse, the village suffered from a drought last year, with no rain in July and August, which affected farm yields. "After asking a lot of questions, we finally found out that, because water runs downhill and Zhuyuan happens to be above the water source, the water cannot flow to every Zhuyuan household," said volunteer Liu Mei. "When there is a drought, families growing turnips or cabbages will have irrigation problems."

So the villagers were especially happy to see the arrival of the volunteers and the food, clothes and blankets they brought. One lady came, wearing thin layers of clothing, despite the bitter cold. "I wear this when it is cold," she explained. "There is nothing else I can do. I do not have any other clothes and cannot afford a winter coat. I do not have the money. Whatever money I have, I spend it on food for our little baby."

It was the same scene in Dashao village; only money for food, not for clothes. Its residents used to make a good living from growing flowers, which they sold in Kunming, whose markets supply the whole nation. Then came the ban on chemical fertilizer and an end to growing flowers as well as many vegetables. Overnight, the village went from prosperity to poverty. A year ago, the volunteers went there and distributed cooking oil, rice, quilts, clothing and padded jackets. When they returned this year, they found that many were wearing the same jackets; the label from Hualien in Taiwan was a constant reminder that someone cared for them. "A year ago, we gave them care and comfort," said volunteer Liu Mei. "This winter you can see the old people still wearing the cotton clothes, like that grandfather who was helped by his wife to wash his clothes and dry them on this sunny day. They keep them as good as new." She and other volunteers visited the home of Cai Tianfu, 44, who is crippled and unable to work. They found his earth-built home bare except for a few empty bowls; this they have seen before, but it left their hearts full of sadness. "You do not have enough bedding," said Liu Mei. "Where is the winter quilt we gave you last year?" Cai explained that, because the house had many rats, he had stored it at his mother's home. "I wrapped it up well and left it there." Liu told him that he had to use it, otherwise he would fall sick.

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The residents were delighted with the quilted shirts and jackets brought by the volunteers. They loaded them into the carts and the baskets of the villagers. For Grandmother Yang Qiaozhi, the journey home was a challenge, with roads so steep that she had to go on foot. Volunteers went with her to help carry the load. After traveling 30 minutes along a mountain path, they arrived at her home; she lives alone, since the death of her husband and with her children living far away. To survive, she must carefully ration her food; her life is very simple. "My home is embarrassing. My blankets are all so tattered and do not protect me from the cold. I need many to stay warm."

Among the volunteers were doctors. One found a young boy who struggles to read and holds books close to his face, twisting them back and forth. Dr Lin Rongzong examined him and found that he had been forced to wear glasses that did not suit his eyes. His family and teachers believed that he had cataracts. Without money for testing, they had given up hope. "He has not got cataracts," said Dr Lin. "He is just near-sighted and one eye is very bad." The volunteers provided contact information and promised to arrange treatment. They were very touched to receive gifts from two students, one a quilted jacket and the other a card. "I did this jacket for our aunts because they have given us so many things," said Yu Haibo. "They came from very far away. One of the uncles says that it looks like a jacket but it is really made of love." Li Yuhui said that they had made a card as a gesture of thanks. "Master Cheng Yen, we children of the mountains love you!" Like the bright sun of the Yunnan mountains, these words pieced the heart of every volunteer, bringing the warmth of love in this place, so cold and remote.

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### **A decade of winter relief in Guizhou**

In the mountainous southwest, Guizhou is one of the poorest provinces in China. Tzu Chi Foundation has been providing winter relief there for more than 10 years. This year it delivered rice, winter clothes, blankets and other necessities to 18,000 people in several rural areas. Members of the [Tzu Chi International Medical Association](#) (TIMA) also provided consultations to 1,660 people in three days, with many local doctors participating.

On the morning of January 16, more than 7,000 residents of Dongjia township were lining up to receive the aid; some walked up to two hours to get there. The kits contained rice, vaseline, winter clothes, blankets and other necessities, which the volunteers handed over, as always, with a bow. The clothes will help to protect the residents from the winds that batter their mountain homes during the winter. Volunteer Chen Meiqian, from Hong Kong, was in charge of reception and registration; it was her first visit to Guizhou since joining the foundation in 2001. She greeted everyone with a heartwarming smile. "They all said thanks to us for coming out of our way but I told them we are only doing what we should," she said. "Seeing them happy, we are happy too." One of the recipients was Luo Fengzhen, a grandmother who is raising her two grandchildren on her own, because their parents are away working. She walked nearly two hours to reach the distribution centre. The three bags of rice she received covered the shortfall

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from last year's harvest. With effective planning and teamwork, the 90 volunteers – from Taiwan and other parts of China – were able to finish the distribution in only one morning.

The TIMA doctors held their clinic at the same time as the distribution. When volunteers noticed that someone was sick, they stepped forward to attend to them. One was Cao Longhua, a 70-year-old grandfather. A volunteer saw a wound on his head that was bleeding, although he was trying to act normally. "My health is failing as I am getting older," he explained. "I felt dizzy yesterday and had a bad fall." It happened the day before; because he could not afford a doctor, he had lived with the pain and the wound. The staff at the clinic sutured the wound and the pain began to subside. TIMA doctor Hong Hongdian, who works in the south of Taiwan, said that he knew Guizhou was very poor. "I have seen documentaries by brother Gao (about life in Guizhou). This place really needs us." Dr Hong has participated in countless Tzu Chi free clinics all over the world and has refined the kit he carries so that it contains the material that is most needed. Also taking part was Dr Zhang Yulin, superintendent of Tzu Chi's hospital in Yuli, southeast Taiwan. With the help of these volunteers, residents were able to get rid of pain and afflictions that had plagued them for years.

Then the volunteers and the residents shared a lunch of hot pot, a way of welcoming them into the greater Tzu Chi family. At the end, they handed out blessing cards from Master Cheng Yen and bamboo coin banks. "Tzu Chi started decades ago, with 30 people each donating NT\$50 cents each day," said volunteer Chen Huixiong. "The money was then used to help others, which has grown into the Tzu Chi you see today." Inspired by this story, each resident was happy to take one home. They know that, while they are one of the poorest provinces in China, they too can help others and build up their own blessings.



### **Local doctors join TIMA clinic**

During the relief distribution, more than a dozen doctors and nurses from local hospitals joined the free clinics. One of them was held in the mountainous district of Luodian, where Dr Yang Zaiyong was treating patients. Yang, 30, was born in Luodian and, after completing his training, was posted to a well-paid position at a hospital in the provincial capital, Guiyang. It was a major achievement for a local doctor. But, in 2007, he decided to return to his hometown and work in its county hospital. "Life is not about making the most money. This is my hometown. We all know how backward this area is. So I thought I should apply what I have learnt and serve my hometown." Seeing that Tzu Chi shared his ideals, he volunteered to join the TIMA clinic.

Alongside him was Dr Wei Yuan, assistant director of pediatrics at the Luodian Chinese Medical Clinic. One of the few female doctors in Luodian, she cares deeply about the limited access of local people to health care. She met Tzu Chi more than five years ago and has participated in all its free clinics since. "We wanted to do this earlier but there was not a venue available. Tzu Chi's free clinics have made our dreams come true. Everyone wants to do good deeds." She has slowly seen changes taking place around her. "In the beginning, I was the only local doctor taking part. But, with each free clinic, more and more began to participate. Now many from the larger county and town hospitals come to help." As the number of patients at TIMA clinics has

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increased, so has the number of local doctors and nurses. Among them was Xu Jian, a young and well-dressed practitioner of Chinese medicine. "My parents live in a similar environment. Seeing this stirs emotions inside me. I feel sad for these people." This year, with the addition of TIMA volunteers, the number of counters at the clinics increased from three to eight, providing patients with quick and efficient service. "Last year the free clinics could only accommodate about 200 patients a day," said volunteer Wang Tianwei. "This year, in Dongjia alone, we served 630 patients and were finished before one in the afternoon."

Also helping were local young men who put on the Tzu Chi vest to help the old and weak take their relief supplies home. They included people who had received scholarships from Tzu Chi and wished to repay the charity they had received. "The scholarship was very helpful," said Jian Wangxiang, a college student from Pingyan. He has been receiving aid for three years and is a freshman in art at Kaili College in Guiyang. "We are just students from farming families. Although our parents pay for our tuition, we can with Tzu Chi's help do more both academically and in life. I am willing to do whatever I can to help. After all, the uncles and aunties of Tzu Chi have helped us so much."

After a decade of winter relief, the spirit of the foundation is being embraced by local people. The distributions feel increasingly like a family gathering. Everyone is doing their part to improve the lives of people in this barren region of China.

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### **Empowering people**

In Sichuan, the central province devastated by a terrible earthquake in May 2008, the foundation carried out winter distribution for the second year, in several locations. One was the town of Shigu, at the Tianhou Temple, recently renovated after a fire. The supplies were stored in a place where they were protected by guards appointed by the local government. They worked 24-hour shifts, sleeping in tents which barely shielded them from the cold. "Each relief package from Tzu Chi will benefit one old person," said security guard Zhong Qixu. "The operation has to go smoothly or there will be problems."

Early in the morning, when the fog had barely cleared, people gathered and the volunteers were busy preparing the supplies. The distribution began at 8:30am. The volunteers bowed as they gave the items to the residents, who accepted them with respect and enthusiasm. "I bought this cotton top for the New Year," said Zhang Xianglong, a resident of Shigu. "Today is special. Tzu Chi volunteers have traveled a great distance to come here, so it is an important day. Thank you all very much." One grandmother, named Huang, walked one hour to receive her supplies and thank the volunteers. Touched, they hired a pedicab, while family members and neighbors helped her take back the supplies. Her hometown was affected by the earthquake but she was able to return; with the love and help of relatives and neighbors, she was able to forget the terrible experience. As they remembered their own ordeal, the residents also offered their

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prayers to the victims of the earthquake in Haiti.



As in Guizhou, local volunteers played an important role in the distribution. They arrived early and served alongside the visiting volunteers. “Look, there are so many Tzu Chi people devoting themselves here,” said Feng Sunxiu. “We can contribute too, so that is what we are doing. We are very happy too, to see the recipients so happy.” Each bag of rice weighs 15 kilograms. Ferrying several bags at once, even when using a cart, was not easy. They helped with the distribution and cleaning up afterwards. Among them was Liu Xuewei, a teaching assistant at the School of Management at Chengdu University. “This is such a good environment. Every day I am here, I am improving myself spiritually. It’s wonderful. I called my office last night and asked if I could stay an extra day and they agreed.” As a teacher and a father, Liu is concerned that society and education are increasingly focused on material achievements and neglecting the relations between people, purer and simpler. “Here, everyone is motivated from the heart.”

Love from the bottom of the heart can touch others without words. Even a police officer was moved to join and help with the distribution. Those who contributed selflessly were as happy as the aid recipients.

One of the local volunteers was Diao Chunyan, who helped at a three-day free clinic in the town of Luoshui that began on January 16. Those who saw her serving tea and biscuits had no idea of her terrible ordeal. When she began to walk at the age of two, she felt a pain which grew so severe over the years that she could not go to school. It was a congenital hip disorder. Without the money for treatment, she could do nothing but live with the pain. Fortunately, she was discovered by Tzu Chi volunteers, who helped her to get corrective surgery. Today she is healthy and full of gratitude. So she and a group of local teenagers volunteered to help at the free clinic. It gave her a sense of accomplishment. “I feel something that I cannot exactly describe. It is a sweetness that melts in your heart.”