

## A Humanitarian Education

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation  
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Chiang Mai Tzu Chi School, located in the ancient city of Amphur Fang in northern Thailand, opened its doors to students in 2005. This year, it produced its first batch of graduates. "I want to be a great person!" has become a mantra and a goal among the students. Such an exclamation is music to the ears of the parents who have had to sacrifice to put their children through the school. It's also the reason why teachers are willing to come from far away to teach in this remote region. They want to help these students realize their dreams.



Learning Chinese has recently become a popular trend in Thailand, and learning the language is emphasized at Chiang Mai Tzu Chi School. In addition to learning Chinese and other academic subjects, students in the school are taught to cultivate their moral character. They are learning to become decent, upright people who will venerate the traditional Chinese and Thai cultures of civility and graciousness.

At five in the morning, darkness and silence envelop the village of Mae Ai in the Amphur Fang district of Chiang Mai Province. The stars have not yet faded from the sky and dawn is still some time away, but a yellow light spills out of the window of a farmhouse and throws a bright square on the ground below. Zhang Jia-li (张嘉莉), an elementary-school student, is already up and getting ready for school.

Jia-li washes her face, changes into her uniform, and ties her hair into two neat braids. Her simple breakfast consists of a boxed drink and two pieces of toast.

Jia-li is a third-generation Chinese; her grandparents came from Yunnan, China. Though of Chinese descent, she is more comfortable speaking Thai. She transferred from a local public school to the elementary division of Chiang Mai Tzu Chi School in 2007 in order to learn Chinese. There was no vacancy in the fifth grade when she took the entrance examination, so she volunteered to move down a grade to get into the school.



Jia-li's new school is farther from her home than her former school. To be on time for the flag-raising ceremony, she has to get up two hours earlier than she did before. Her schedule would be difficult for an adult, not to mention a child. Her mother feels sorry for her. "I know it's hard on her now, but I believe her future will be better than those of the other kids in the village."

In a pepper field not far from Chiang Mai Tzu Chi School, a woman wearing a broad-brimmed hat busily sprinkles water on the crops. A mask covers her entire face and neck; only her two eyes are visible. Nearby, a water pump rumbles loudly as it delivers river water to the field. The woman points to a large pile of harvested shallots lying to one side; she tells us their price has dropped from 11 baht a kilogram to four baht (32 to 11 U.S. cents). Her husband and their

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five-year-old daughter are busy tying up shallots into bundles on the front porch of their stilt house. They hang the bundles from a horizontal beam to dry, waiting to sell them when the prices improve.

The husband works as a construction contractor in addition to helping out on the farm. He points to the Tzu Chi school in the middle of a field and tells us proudly that he was involved in its construction. "No other school is as beautiful and sturdy as that one. It was founded by Taiwanese people. Folks here all want to send their kids to that school." He adds that he and his wife plan to enroll their daughter in the school next year.



### The growing trend of learning Chinese

The Thai economy has grown rapidly in recent years. Many Chinese businesspeople have established factories in Thailand, creating a demand for employees who can speak Chinese. As a result, learning the language has become a popular trend.

Students in the elementary section of Chiang Mai Tzu Chi School receive five hours of Chinese instruction every week. Teachers are hired from Taiwan to teach students standard Chinese. Principal Mandhana Chongmansathaporn (หมัดนา) remarks, "Anyone who wants to master a language must practice it often. Without constant practice, you could study for years and not know how to form a complete sentence." The principal hopes that the school's teachers will spend time after school tutoring students in Chinese after construction of the school dormitory is complete.

The student body is comprised of two main ethnic groups. Seventy percent of the students are ethnic Thai. They attend the school to learn Chinese as a second language, hoping to be more competitive in their future careers. The other 30 percent of the students are of Chinese descent. They are expected to learn the language so that they can help carry on the Chinese culture and heritage.

Amporn Saejiaw, 15, is one of the best students in the school. Her Chinese pronunciation is flawless. Her Chinese language teacher, Feng Ling-ai (เฟิงลิงไถ่), praises her skills. "Her Chinese is so good that the regular teaching materials are inadequate for her. I have to prepare special materials just for her."



Amporn thanks her mother for her proficiency in the Chinese language. Mrs. Saejiaw was born in Taiwan and immigrated to Thailand with her parents when she was young. She grew up in Thailand, got married, and soon after gave birth to Amporn. When Amporn was two years old, she started teaching her Chinese using books and videotapes from Taiwan. "We didn't just teach her the language; we also taught her the history. She is a Taiwanese and should know

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her roots and origins."

Amporn entered the Tzu Chi school two years ago. She had just finished elementary school and was about to advance to junior high school when her parents decided that she should transfer to the Tzu Chi school instead. It meant that she'd have to enter the fifth-grade class. Although she was two years beyond the fifth grade already, it was the highest grade in the school at the time. She objected strongly to her parents decision. "My scores were very good; I didn't understand why I should move down two grades just to study at that school."

However, her reluctant attitude gradually changed after she entered the school. "The new school put a lot of emphasis on learning Chinese. Because mother had been teaching me the language since I was young, I took the Chinese lessons in stride." Amporn derived a great sense of achievement from her Chinese lessons and grew to like the school. The lively, interesting ways the teachers conducted the classes increased her fondness for the school even more. "Although I had to move down two grades, I feel that I'm learning a lot more here."

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### A humanitarian education

Every Thai teacher that is hired to work at the school must undergo a six-month Tzu Chi training program in Taiwan before they start teaching. It is hoped that they will return to Thailand to serve as a positive influence on the students and help create good traditions at the school.



Pacharee Deejing, a Thai teacher at the school, remarked that the six-month training program had a profound impact on her. She admitted that she often used to resort to corporal punishment or yell at students if they couldn't remember what she taught. She would even look down on the slower students. "But then I went to Taiwan for the training program, and I saw how the teachers at Hualien Tzu Chi Elementary School used praise instead of punishment to teach students. The effect was marvelous. That's when I realized the importance of a humanitarian and ethical education as is stressed in every Tzu Chi school."

Many families in northern Thailand live in poverty. Students who come from poorer families tend to compare themselves with richer students and complain about their inferior situation. In order to correct their negative attitudes and encourage them to embrace a positive outlook on life, the school arranges for students to participate in volunteer activities and to follow Tzu Chi volunteers on their visits to aid recipients and nursing homes.

Deejing said that after a few such visits, there is a visible change in many of the students. "Seeing is believing. Instead of telling students how fortunate they are, we take them to see how others live. They learn to cherish what they have after seeing the suffering of the needy." The approach works wonders. Students often tell Deejing that they feel fortunate after such experiences because they have parents to look after them and they have everything they need.

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Anyone who visits the school can see how well-mannered the students are. For example, students stop chasing each other and bow respectfully to passing elders; they help their teachers bring materials to the classroom before a class begins; and when an exam is over, they help their teachers collect the exam papers, put them in order, and place them on the teacher's desk.



With a reputation as a school that fosters upright character and refined manners, the Chiang Mai Tzu Chi School is attracting more and more students. Many parents want to send their children to this school. At every transfer exam, there are always more students wanting to enter the school than vacancies available. Only 12 spaces were opened for the second grade this year, and they were all filled.

March 15 was graduation day this year. A total of 36 students graduated. Thirty-three of them will go directly to the junior high school section of the school. One of the graduates, Wirawan Sa-nguansakchai, burst into tears when she expressed her gratitude to her teacher. She said that in the past, she slouched when she walked, talked with food in her mouth, and often left the water running after washing her hands. "Now I don't do those things anymore. If I hadn't met such a wonderful teacher, I wouldn't have become what I am today. Our teacher treated us like her own children and devoted herself wholeheartedly to educating us."

Her mother was delighted to see her transformation. "I want to thank the school and the teachers for giving me a wonderful daughter."

Wirawan couldn't speak a word of Chinese when she first entered the school three years ago, but today she is the student who has made the most progress. She has even learned to type in Chinese.

### Supportive parents

Most of the students at the school wear uniforms that are much bigger than the size they should be wearing. This reflects the modest financial situation the students are in. They have learned that they can wear bigger uniforms longer because they won't outgrow them as quickly. No strategy to conserve money is overlooked here.



The teachers at the Tzu Chi school make an effort each semester to visit the home of every student to learn the condition of each family. Most of the families live modestly; some can only afford to pay the tuition fees in installments.

"A friend told me that the Tzu Chi Foundation based in Taiwan was devoted to doing good deeds and that it had built a school here," said Weera, a Thai who had enrolled his son in the

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Tzu Chi school. Weera sells snacks in the market. Although he has a mortgage to pay and is financially strained, he insists that his son, Apisit, should receive a good education. Weera is supportive of the school. He even goes with Tzu Chi volunteers to visit aid recipients and help clean up their homes or build houses for them. He wants to be an example for his son. He wants his son to become a kind-hearted person who loves to help other people.

Weera feels nationality isn't an issue when it comes to doing good deeds. It's not surprising that he is training to become a Tzu Cheng Faith Corps member.

When Mrs. Yang and her husband heard that the Tzu Chi school was recruiting students, they traveled for three hours through the mountains to visit the school. Mrs. Yang is originally from Yunnan, China, so the emphasis on Chinese language instruction is important to her. They took to the school immediately. They were impressed with the new buildings and were pleased to discover that the teachers and staff members were all very polite and friendly. "The school focuses on learning Chinese as well as on guiding students to become decent people. This makes it stand out from other schools."

They decided to move down from the mountains so that their children could study at the Tzu Chi school. With her three children going to school at the same time, it used to be a big headache when it came time to pay the school tuition. Fortunately, the Tzu Chi school allows parents to pay the tuition in installments. Mrs. Yang pointed to a tiny figure of the Great Compassion Bodhisattva hanging from her neck and a Buddhist rosary on her wrist. She said they were gifts from some of the teachers at school. When the teachers discovered that she was very worried about her children's tuition fees, they expressed care for her and often spent time talking to her. "They hoped the Bodhisattva would bless me so I could be happier," she says.

Mrs. Yang said that her three children had all changed for the better since coming to the school. Her oldest son, Song-wu (宋武), has studied at the school for three years so far, and his temper has greatly improved. After school, he even helps her sweep and mop the floor at home. Mrs. Yang pointed to her youngest son, still in her arms, and said that she would also send him to the same school in the future.

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### Going where they are most needed

People who come to visit the Tzu Chi school are often impressed by the teaching staff. "The teachers here are efficient and effective, very different from other schools," remarked one visitor.

Because the school is located in a remote area, it has never been an easy task to recruit teachers. Chen Chao-hai (陳朝海), in charge of the Tzu Chi mission of education in Thailand, told us that the school had held three recruiting exams in the past, and although more than 60 teachers signed up for each exam, no more than 20 teachers ever showed up. The remote location of the school was the main reason for such a poor turnout.

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