

Old Schools Reborn

Written by Ye Zi-hao

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The old school buildings in Yangon, Myanmar, were rich in history and beauty, but they were no match for Nargis, a violent cyclone that swept through the country in May 2008. Nearly 70 percent of the schools were damaged or destroyed. However, the terrible destruction wrought by the cyclone also brought forth an unprecedented opportunity for new birth.



Tzu Chi has underwritten the reconstruction of five damaged schools left in the wake of Nargis. Some buildings require major repair and others require reconstruction from the foundation up. Regardless of what needs to be done, Tzu Chi's project team is mindful of the balance that must be struck between the preservation of historic structures and their functionality and safety. It is a challenge they gladly accept.

The Burmese have long prized school education. The country boasts a literacy rate of over 90 percent. Unfortunately, Cyclone Nargis brought catastrophic destruction to many schools in May 2008. Countless school buildings collapsed or became unsafe for use, putting the students' education at risk. To help students get back to school, Tzu Chi undertook the reconstruction of five schools. Construction on the first school, No. 4 Thingankyun Primary School, started in November 2008.

For a few days in early December 2008, I accompanied the Tzu Chi volunteers responsible for the project as they surveyed the five schools and planned to move the project forward. I witnessed firsthand the dedication and care of the Tzu Chi volunteers and local educators. All were working extremely hard in less than ideal conditions.

No. 4 Thingankyun Primary School

Construction of the new No. 4 Thingankyun Primary School began on November 2, 2008. The school is scheduled to reopen in June 2009. With only an eight-month window to complete the work, workers must proceed at full speed to meet this ambitious goal. They work every day, including weekends, and rest only on national holidays. When I visited in early December, they had already finished the foundations and pillars for some of the classrooms. Khin Zaw, the project engineer, summed up the team's determination to make the target date: "We work from eight to five or, if necessary, to eleven."



The school had survived the elements for 44 years, but it wasn't able to withstand Cyclone Nargis. The storm left the school with just one classroom standing; the whole school had to be rebuilt. Ironically, the devastation actually gave the team much more leeway in designing and rebuilding the school. Starting nearly from scratch and building from the ground up, they will be able to erect a much better school.

In fact, the new school campus has been so well designed that it meets the more stringent

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requirements for middle schools. As such, the government elevated it to a middle school before the work even started. It will now be a school with nine grades, five elementary and four middle school.

For now, each of the 800 first- through fifth-graders has to make do with only a half-day of class in either of two makeshift classrooms. At any given time, 200 students from various grades occupy each of the classrooms. One of the classrooms is in the school proper and the other at nearby Zaya Thu Ka Temple.

The students have brought liveliness and noise to the quiet temple. The monks have adjusted their schedules to accommodate the students: They now meditate either before or after school.

Principal Myaw San shuttles between the two sites to make sure that classes are going well. She also wants to elevate disaster awareness and preparedness for the whole school. She looks forward to the opening of the new school. "When the new school is completed, it will be able to weather even a cyclone. All the students and their families can take shelter at the school if necessary."

San Pya Primary School

San Pya is a small village in Kungyangon, south-southeast of Yangon (Rangoon) near the Indian Ocean. The primary school in San Pya was founded on the same day in 1959 that the village itself was established. Just as they were preparing to celebrate their 50th anniversary, the cyclone hit and threw everything into chaos.

The village was severely damaged and the school was entirely wiped out when Nargis made landfall on May 2, 2008. Despite the destruction, the villagers wanted to have the students back in class by June. Just about everybody in the village scrambled to make that date.



Principal Than Win and her husband, village head Aung Chit, donated the land next to their own house to build a temporary school. They called on students' parents to salvage usable building materials from the damaged school site for the cause, and Aung Chit donated some lumber himself. They and many others rolled up their sleeves and went to work putting up the temporary classroom.

Than Win said, "The roof of my own house was blown away by the cyclone, and a falling tree wrecked my kitchen. But building the temporary school took precedence over fixing my own home. I literally didn't have time to even think about the damage to my own house."

The group pulled it off with a lot of toil and sweat, and 194 students of the school resumed their full-day classes by the deadline. But conditions in the temporary school are far from ideal. The students are packed in a single large classroom, each trying to listen to their own teacher while other teachers are teaching their own students nearby. It's not the best environment for learning, but at least the kids are in school. The students were also fortunate to have received

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books, school supplies, desks and chairs from the education bureau and UNICEF.

Everyone was happy when classes resumed in the temporary school, but everyone is even more excited about what's to come—a brand new school, potentially an elementary and middle school combination, for which the government has already allocated a two-acre plot of land. According to the rebuilding plan, the new school, along with residential units, will be part of a new Tzu Chi Great Love Village.

Many people in San Pya make their living as fishermen, dock laborers, or rickshaw pullers. Most students need to help out at home after school. It's understandable then that the villagers hope for a middle school right in the village. This will easily allow the older children to attend school during the day and get home quickly to help out after school. Principal Than Win hopes that the new school can help address this common need of the villagers.

In Burmese, “san pya” means “a model that others emulate.” The name is well suited. Students in San Pya Elementary School have historically performed well. In fact, the school was ranked among the top three in terms of academic performance among all schools in Kungyangon.

With a new village and a new school on the horizon, residents and Tzu Chi volunteers are working hard to make sure that San Pya village in fact emerges as a “san pya.”

No. 1 Kamaryut High School

The damage sustained by this school for girls in Yangon was less severe than that of the previous two. However, the damage was enough to force the school to cut school days short, offering half-day, rather than full-day, classes. This abbreviated schedule is necessary in order to accommodate all the students, but it impairs their studies. It's no surprise that everyone is most eager for the school to be repaired so the students can resume their normal schooling.



Kamaryut High School has a proud history of 58 years with many achievements, according to the principal, Khin Kyone. Fully 67 percent of the class of 2008 passed their college entrance exams. Students also excel in intermural contests, especially basketball and martial arts.

Unfortunately, athletic training at the school has been severely curtailed. The gym is too dangerous to use, as are three class buildings and the cafeteria. From a distance, those buildings appear to be standing quite normally. However, closer inspection reveals cracked pillars, slanted beams, and collapsed ceilings. The damage bears witness to the awesome destructive power of Nargis.

Although its roof was almost torn off and its walls and floors cracked, the gym remains structurally sound due to the strength of its wood frame. The three Malaysian architects on the school repair team marveled at the gym's engineering. Architect Tang Yong-tai () exclaimed

excitedly about this gem of a building, “This is a union of beauty and structural mechanics!”

None of the pillars in the gym were built perpendicular to the ground. Instead, pairs of pillars in “V” formations were built from the foundation up. Wooden bars connect the main frames, forming crosses and triangles for a strong truss structure. Buildings based on steel trusses are rather common, but the gym (built four decades ago), unlike most buildings, is constructed entirely from wood. Volunteers on the repair team fully intend to retain as much of this treasure as possible.

No. 1 Mayangone High School

Founded more than six decades ago in the Northern District of Yangon, Mayangone High School has been through some rough times. According to the principal, Aung Kyi, the area was caught in fierce crossfire between invading Japanese and defending British troops during World War II. By the end of the war, the town had been heavily damaged. Thousands of children were left with no schools to attend. At that time, Dharma Master Saidimar vowed to build a school. He sold his property and led his disciples to donate funds for the cause.

The school opened in 1946 and enrollment kept climbing. Master Saidimar and his followers turned the school over to the government in 1954. Though now a public school, a statue of its late benefactor stands in the auditorium.

In April 2008, one of the school buildings burned down as a result of an electrical fire. Twelve classrooms were destroyed. Soon after the fire, Nargis brought more destruction to the school. Principal Aung Kyi, barely three months at the helm, was left to pick up the pieces and rebuild from the double blow. But he is undaunted.

“I come from here,” Aung Kyi said. “Many students here are my relatives—even my two grandsons study here.” At 59, he is eligible to retire, but he vows to stay on and oversee the reconstruction of the school. He plans to retire only when the construction is complete, a proper end to his 34-year teaching career.

He gave Tzu Chi volunteers a lesson in local geography. Pointing at a map of the country in the hallway, he said that past cyclones had almost always first hit Arakan State, northwest of Yangon. The high mountains of that area tended to weaken the cyclones before they could hit areas further inland. But Nargis didn’t follow the usual path. Instead, it made landfall further south and east than normal, hitting Yangon head on with full force. It caught the region off guard and exacted a heavy toll on lives and buildings.

This school, like many others in the region, suffered a great deal. Its students have been forced to attend school either in the morning or afternoon, but not both. The school has also taken in 50 students from other schools in the vicinity. Tzu Chi plans to demolish buildings unsafe for use and build new classrooms. A new page has just been turned in the school’s history: The school was born in 1946 because of the mercy of a dharma master, and it is reborn in 2008 because of the Great Love of another dharma master—Master Cheng Yen.

No. 4 Ahlone High School

No. 4 Ahlone High School is one of the oldest schools in Myanmar. It was founded in 1864 by a British church in the Western District of Yangon. The school, with its solid brick buildings, has stood the test of the elements for nearly one and a half centuries. It survived the onslaught of Nargis too, but roof tiles were ripped off and floors and beams were cracked. Of the 59 classrooms in the school, 22 were rendered unusable, forcing the 2,300 students to attend school only half days.



Architect Huang Mu-jin (黃慕君) pointed out, “Buildings here are more Victorian than anything else, but with local adaptations.” For this campus, the British modified traditional Victorian architecture for the hot, humid, rainy weather typical of this tropical nation: The eaves are extra long, the roofs are steeper, and the outside hallways are more spacious for better ventilation.

In these buildings and on the surrounding fields, students study, play sports, and grow intellectually and physically. The learning environment is excellent. It is perhaps not surprising that 70 percent of the graduates here earn admission to national colleges or even the prestigious Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. Along with such outstanding academic achievements is an equally impressive list of medals that students have won in athletic competitions. A big trophy that stands proudly in the principal’s office was won by the school’s cricket team at a national championship.

Model schools

These five schools will return to normalcy in short order as the reconstruction or repairs are completed. Tzu Chi wants to help them become or continue to be model schools that cultivate talents for society.

This undertaking to rebuild schools, which Tzu Chi calls Project Hope, follows the distributions of rice, rice seeds, and fertilizer that the foundation made soon after the cyclone hit. Through this project, Tzu Chi volunteers hope to inspire students to do good and help others who are in need.

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