

# A World of Great Love: Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation

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## Contents

### Introduction

#### **1.0 The Institution**

- 1.1 [Master Cheng Yen and the Founding of Tzu Chi](#)
- 1.2 [Three Goals and Four Missions](#)
- 1.3 [From Taiwan to Canada](#)

#### **2.0 Tzu Chi Montréal**

- 2.1 [Certification](#)
- 2.2 [Foundations](#)
- 2.3 [Office Space](#)
  - 2.3.1 [Library](#)
  - 2.3.2 [Tzu Chi Television](#)
- 2.4 [Membership and Volunteers](#)
  - 2.4.1 [Membership and Funding](#)
- 2.5 [The Organizational Structure](#)
- 2.6 [Volunteering](#)
  - 2.6.1 [Attitude of the Volunteers](#)
- 2.7 [Commissioners](#)
- 2.8 [Activities and Classes](#)
  - 2.8.1 [Regular Activities](#)
  - 2.8.2 [Special Activities](#)
- 2.9 [Numbers and Demographics](#)
  - 2.9.1 [Gender](#)
  - 2.9.2 [Ethnicity](#)
  - 2.9.3 [Language](#)
  - 2.9.4 [Age](#)
  - 2.9.5 [Religion](#)

#### **3.0 Analysis**

- 3.1 [Why are People Members?](#)
  - 3.1.1 [Front-Line Volunteering](#)
  - 3.1.2 [Personal Cultivation/Religious Reasons](#)
  - 3.1.3 [Social Networking and Friendships](#)
  - 3.1.4 [Cultural Preservation](#)
  - 3.1.5 [Joy and Happiness](#)
- 3.2 [Adaptation](#)
- 3.3 [Buddhism as a Reason to Act](#)
- 3.4 [Staying Out of Politics](#)

#### **4.0 Conclusions**

### Acknowledgements

### Works Cited and Resources

## Introduction

The purpose of this field research report is to explore the Montréal branch of the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation (BCRTCF). The newest Canadian branch of Tzu Chi International, the Montréal branch began in early 2003. This report is the outcome of two months of field research with this new branch. The report is divided into three major sections. The first part provides the historical background of Tzu Chi and its founder, Master Cheng Yen, as well as a description of Tzu Chi's missions. The majority of this information was gleaned from Tzu Chi's website ([www.tzuchi.org/global](http://www.tzuchi.org/global)). The second part focuses specifically on the Montréal branch. Everything from the founding of the Montréal branch, to its demographics, to its activities, and even the layout of its office are discussed in detail. All of this information was gleaned from field work, included observation and participation in activities, and several interviews, formal and informal. The third section integrates the first and second parts through analysis. Understanding the principles behind Tzu Chi allows us to better understand and interpret the activity of the Montréal branch. Field research provided us the opportunity to pose many direct questions about the organization as a whole, included inquiries about Tzu Chi's strictly apolitical stance, as well as the role of Buddhism as a 'religion' in the organization. By understanding the foundation of Tzu Chi, we were also able to analyse how Tzu Chi 'translates' in Montréal and the particular challenges a foreign organization faces when attempting to carry out charity work in a wholly different culture and society. In this field research project we learned about the underlying philosophy of Tzu Chi and glimpsed how Tzu Chi interacts with new host countries, but most importantly, how Tzu Chi translates here in Montréal.

Though the majority of our intellectual (or 'academic') understanding of the organization was derived from literature both online and in print, if we consider that the primary philosophy of Tzu Chi is 'Buddhism in Action,' then perhaps the biggest lesson learned from this field research project is that to really get at the heart of this organization, one must witness – and perhaps even participate in – the action. While a certain and plentiful amount of understanding can be generated from 'book-work,' so much learning extends beyond the classroom into active involvement in the outside world. Interestingly, in the same way Tzu Chi strives to bring the principles of Buddhism out of the monastery and into society, so our field research taught us the importance of bringing understanding out of the ivory tower of academia and applying it to the real and living world around us.

Each member of our research team chose this organization for different reasons. Unfortunately, we did not have the participation of our third team member, Bradley Hall, in the writing of this report. Thus, this report shall not attempt to represent his experiences or final analysis of Tzu Chi. However, Brad was actively involved in carrying out the field research as well as the preparation and performance of our final presentation. He was an invaluable team mate and a real pleasure to work with. This report necessarily benefits from his understandings and insights that he gave to us along the way, but is surely weaker for the absence of his words.

We chose this organization for different reasons. Ming chose this organization because he had long heard of the deeds of this organization even before he left Taiwan, and yet he feels he knows very little about it. This project provided him with the opportunity to satisfy his curiosity and interest in this organization. Amanda had not before heard of Tzu Chi, but was familiar with its founding principles of 'engaged' Buddhism. Tzu Chi uses Buddhist principles for social action; here is an opportunity to see 'engaged' Buddhism in action. She discovered within this organization a world-wide movement for inspiring compassion and manifesting concrete social change outside of the political arena. BCRTCF carries out the very heart of Buddhism and brings real change to those in need as well as to the volunteers themselves.

## 1.0 The Institution

In Chinese, *tzu* means ‘compassion’ and *chi* means ‘to help’. Named after these two words, the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation (BCRTOF) was founded in Hualien, Taiwan on April 14th, 1966 by Venerable Master Cheng Yen, a Buddhist nun. In the last 38 years Tzu Chi has become a world-wide and world-renowned charity organization, as well as the largest non-government organization in Taiwan. To date, Tzu Chi has branches in over 30 countries with roughly 4,000,000 members. The charity activities of Tzu Chi range from international disaster relief to providing medical assistance and education, and many things in between. While its operations are spread around the globe, all members of the Tzu Chi Foundation look upon Venerable Master Cheng Yen as their spiritual leader. Thus, in order to understand how the Tzu Chi foundation arose, one must first understand the story of Master Cheng Yen herself.



Figure 1: Master Cheng Yen (left) and Master Hsiu Tao (right)<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1 Master Cheng Yen and the Founding of Tzu Chi

Master Cheng Yen was born a daughter of a middle-class family named Wang in a small town called Chingshui in central Taiwan in 1937; her parents named her Jinyun. As Charles B. Jones recounts, Master Cheng Yen had been always a filial daughter:

She was a model filial daughter ... once in 1952, her mother fell seriously ill with a perforated ulcer and needed emergency surgery. For three days, Jinyun prayed to Guan Yin and vowed that, in order for her mother to recover, she would trade twelve years of her own life and begin eating a vegetarian diet. During the three nights, she dreamed the same dreams: She saw a small Buddhist temple with a large door ... a beautiful woman seated on a white cloud floated into the temple. Jinyun instinctively knelt before the woman, who tipped a bundle of medicines from a bottle into Jinyun's outstretched hands. Jinyun took the bundle, opened it, and gave it to her mother, at which point the dream faded. After three days of prayers and vows and three nights of this dream, her mother recovered without surgery. Jinyun subsequently kept her vow and began eating a Buddhist vegetarian diet. (Jones 199)

Through this experience and others alike, young Jinyun first began her contact with and understanding of Buddhism. In 1960, Jinyun's father suddenly died due to a brain hemorrhage. She blamed herself for her father's death; she had taken her father home in a car while he was suffering the terrible headache, not realizing the bumpy ride would worsen his condition. This accident stunned Jinyun and led her to think about the purpose and nature of life. In search for the answers to her questions, Jinyun crossed paths with Master Hsiu Tao, the abbess of a nearby temple. Jones recounts:

To resolve her feeling of guilt, she [Jinyun] performed repentance rituals at the Ciyun temple in Fengyuan. Afterward, she visited this temple frequently and became friendly with Xiudao [Hsiu Tao], a nun who had studied in Japan during the Japanese colonial period. Her contact with Xiudao and the other nuns led her to consider for the first time the possibility of seeking ordination herself, and that year (1960), she made her first attempt to leave the household life ... However, within three days, her mother found her and compelled her to return home. (Jones 200)

<sup>1</sup> Taken from the Tzu Chi Global Website: <http://www.tzuchi.org/global/master/index.html>, Dharma Master Cheng Yen, Biography – 2. Master Hsiu Tao.

In September of 1961, and without the approval of her family, Jinyun left home with Master Hsiu Tao and they traveled together throughout Eastern Taiwan, a less economically developed area of Taiwan. Witnessing incredible poverty, Jinyun made a self-resolution to help those in needs. How she would do this is the incredible story of the formation of the Tzu Chi foundation.

In the winter of 1962, when these two women arrived in Hualien, they came across an old monk of the Tong Gin temple located there. They told the monk that they were interested in travelling to Tianshen and he introduced them to Mr. Hsu, who was planning to build a temple [Shen Te Temple] in Tianshen. Though she didn't know it at the time, "the introduction made by this old Buddha marked the end of Jinyun's wandering" (Ho 37). It turned out that Master Hsiu Tao and Mr. Hsu were part of the same sect of Buddhism, so Mr. Hsu invited Jinyun and Hsiu Tao to stay with him for a while. Mr. Hsu was the responsible for the Pu-Ming temple in the Hsuei village, and this is where they stayed.

This same winter, despite Buddhist regulations against it, Jinyun shaved her own head in Mr. Hsu's home as a symbol of her renunciation of lay life. Master Hsiu Tao eventually returned to her old temple, due to illness. Jinyun stayed in Hsuei; she asked Mr. Hsu if she could build a small hut behind the temple so that she could continue her study of Buddhism (Ho 38-9), a request which he granted.

In 1963, she went to Taipei in hopes of becoming an ordained nun. Charles recounts the following story:

In early 1963, the annual BAROC<sup>2</sup> ordination session was to take place at the Linji Chan Temple in Taipei, and Jinyun felt that the time had finally arrived for her to become a nun. She took the train to Taipei and arrived at the temple during the registration period. However, during her registration interview, a problem arose: She did not have a tonsure-master, having shaved her own head, and so was ineligible. Dejected, she went to the Huiji Lecture Hall, thinking that she would buy a set of The Collected Works of Taixu to take back to Hualien.

It so happened that Yinshun, an active participant in many BAROC ordinations, was residing at the lecture hall at the time. ...As she was preparing to leave, she suddenly turned to the cleric who was to drive her to the train station and begged him to ask Yinshun to be her tonsure master. The cleric declared this was impossible.... She persisted and went to Yinshun with the request; and he consented, saying that he felt a strong sense of affinity with this young woman. As [he] tonsured her, he gave her an exhortation that has been her maxim ever since: "At all times do everything for Buddhism, everything for sentient beings!" He also gave her a new, official dharma-name: Zhengyan [Cheng Yen]. (Jones 202)

The newly-ordained Cheng Yen began lecturing and eventually acquired disciples. She and her disciples lived in a hut in the back of a temple, studying Buddhist scriptures and making gloves to support themselves. Beginning in 1964, Master Cheng Yen was lecturing in the evenings and farming during the day. Devoting themselves to the study of Buddhism, Master Cheng Yen and her disciples supported themselves by making baby booties and gloves. She continued this work with her disciples for two years. Their fierce dedication would eventually form the 'hard-work ethic' which is the backbone of the Tzu Chi foundation. As the Tzu Chi website recounts:

Tzu Chi members did this worldly work with an other-worldly spirit. Making and selling an extra pair of baby shoes each day, the Master's followers in the early days stitched out the model of the future foundation. Although their lives were unsettled and full of disturbances, they considered their jobs training in learning Buddhism, and so they endured the hardships without any regrets or complaints. To make ends meet, they engaged in more than 21 kinds of handiwork. The first group of nuns who followed the Master firmly believed in the spirit of "no work, no meal," and their spirit bolstered the Master's determination to establish Tzu Chi. The first disciples – Master Te Tzu, Te Chao, Te Jung, and Te En – dedicated themselves with a spirit of complete offering and sacrifice, and they created an atmosphere of frugality and of appreciation for what they had.

In 1966 several coincidental events occurred, providing the catalyst for the formation of Tzu Chi. Ho recounts:

In the spring of 1966, Master Yin Shun, the master of Master Cheng Yen, was invited to lecture at Chinese Cultural University (in Taipei), leaving his temple, MiaolinlanroTaochun in Chiayi unattended. Since he knew Master (Cheng Yen) and her disciples were poor, (he) provided money and asked her to bring her disciples back to Chiayi to attend the temple ...

<sup>2</sup> BAROC stands for Buddhist Association of the Republic of China.



Master Yin Shun knew the master (Cheng Yen) was well-meditated and ready (for the position); however, as soon as the followers in Hualien heard of master (Cheng Yen)'s departure, there were 30 women wrote a letter together to Master Yin Shun, begging him to let Master (Cheng Yen) stay in Hualien...

One day, Master (Cheng Yen) visited the father of one of her disciples in a small clinic in Funglin village. One her way out of the clinic, she saw a large pool of blood on the clinic floor. She was told that an aboriginal woman with a miscarriage was carried for 8 hours to the clinic for treatment, but due to the fact that she couldn't pay for the \$8,000 NT deposit, the clinic refused to treat her...

Master Cheng Yen felt great pain inside, wondering whether the woman is alive or dead; and for the first time, she realized: To commence relief work, there has to be funding. This is a very practical problem. (p 51)



Figure 2: Master Te Tzu working in the rice field<sup>3</sup>

Then, Ho continues,

Just a couple days later when Master [Cheng Yen] returned to Pu-ming temple, three Catholic nuns from HaiShin high school in Hualien came to see her ... The nuns saw Master Cheng Yen working so hard in her studying of Buddhism, so they came to evangelize, in the hope of converting her to Catholicism. They thought that Buddhism is away from the world, and has little influence; [they] thought only the love of God can save the humanity .... Master [Cheng Yen] argued that Sakyamuni Buddha was a real, living man in this world, a real existing Buddha. Buddhism not only teaches men to love all human, but also all living beings [on earth] ....

The nuns said, "Yes, Sakyamuni Buddha was indeed great, and there is indeed wisdom in Buddhism. You Buddhists love all living beings, such compassion is exceptional." Then the nuns said, "Though the benevolence of Catholics is only for humanity, we have retirement homes, hospitals, schools. Whether it's deep in the mountains, by the sea, or on the distant islands, there are Catholic priests, nuns helping the poor, supplying them with flour and clothes. What of the Buddhists?" ...

Master [Cheng Yen] couldn't argue [with it] at the moment, so she said, "Buddhism suggests 'Donation with no fame of oneself', no fame and no profit. Many of the anonymous people who do charitable work in society are Buddhists." .... The three nuns said, "There are many loving people among the Buddhists, the teaching is also good, why not gather all these people together to contribute more to the social welfare?"

Such words touched her [Master Cheng Yen's] heart deeply, she said determinedly, "Yes, I will structure the effort, [I will] name the nameless and give form the abstract." (p 51 - 53)

On April 14th, 1966, Master Cheng Yen established the Tzu Chi Merit Society, operating out of the Pu Ming Temple. According to the Tzu Chi website:

The first members were 30 housewives who donated from their grocery money. Before going to the markets every day, these housewives put NT\$0.50 [US\$0.013] into a bamboo "piggy bank". One of the housewives suggested that it would be more convenient to deposit a lump sum of NT\$15 a month. The Master replied that when they deposited 50 cents a day, they could have a compassionate thought each day rather than once a month. Those housewives brought Tzu Chi's spirit to the markets, so the news that "fifty cents can also help people" spread throughout Hualien.

Within the first five years, the Tzu Chi Merit Society – the forerunner of today's Tzu Chi foundation – helped fifteen families, serving a total of thirty-one elderly and ailing



Figure 3: Master Cheng Yen with her early disciples and follower, taken at the first anniversary of Tzu Chi.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Taken from the photo collection presented in the book, *Great Love: Master Cheng Yen and the world of Tzu Chi*, Chiu, Shiu-Chi, Taipei, Tien-Shia Press, 1996.

<sup>4</sup> Taken from the Tzu Chi Global Website: <http://www.tzuchi.org/global/master/index.html>, Dharma Master Cheng Yen, Biography – 9. First Anniversary.

impoverished people. As word spread about the group, more support and participation followed. The 'fund for the poor' first established by grocery money continued to get larger and larger. As time went on, the Merit Society became the more organized, businesslike Tzu Chi Foundation that it is today.

Though the Tzu Chi Foundation is seemingly like many other charities, it is important to note that Tzu Chi has always and continues to see its actions as specifically 'Buddhist'. Further, many of the participants in Tzu Chi ask to take refuge in Buddhism. According to Ho,

'Let Buddha's heart be my heart, and let Buddha's goal be my goal' is a motto given by master (Cheng Yen) to her disciples. She has also established two rules:

1. Those who take refuge in Buddhism have to be members of the Tzu Chi Merit Society.
2. Those who take refuge in Buddhism have to shoulder the relief works of Tzu Chi Merit Society; words only are not good enough. (p 56)

This attitude reflects Master Cheng Yen's belief that Tzu Chi action was an extension and a necessary part of Buddhist practice. As the organization spreads worldwide, a dilution of the religious roots of the organization is witnessed; however, it must be remembered Tzu Chi began as an outlet of true Buddhism, which Master Cheng Yen interpreted as self-cultivation through compassionate action.

Though they started small, over the last 37 years, Tzu Chi has become an international movement, establishing branches worldwide, responding to disasters and problems everywhere. Master Cheng Yen is the head of the Tzu Chi foundation and its spiritual leader; she is the presiding authority over all actions that are carried out. Members worldwide look to her for spiritual guidance and wisdom. Her 'thoughts'—the aphoristic 'Still Thoughts'—have been made into textbooks and her wisdom is used to guide the actions of individual volunteers as well as the branch organizations worldwide. Her words and philosophies form the foundation of Tzu Chi. Thus, each of the branches are established in the same spirit, with the same goals and same missions.

## 1.2 Three Goals and Four Missions

Master Cheng Yen established three major goals: purifying minds, harmonizing society, and freeing the world from natural disasters<sup>5</sup>. There are four major action 'missions' which help accomplish these three goals. These are in the fields of Charity, Education, Medicine and Culture. As the Tzu Chi magazine describes it, "Charity is the hope of mankind; medical care is the hope of life; education is the hope of society; the promotion of culture is the hope of the soul" (*Tzu Chi Quarterly Winter 2002*: 66). In each new context, these four missions will be carried out in 'translation,' responding to the needs of each individual culture.

As we were told, Tzu Chi focuses on each of these missions for a period of ten years (F3). The first ten years saw a focus on charity. As explained in the history, Tzu Chi began with providing direct cash relief to low-income families. Due to differing tax laws worldwide, Tzu Chi cannot always provide cash relief as is the case in Canada, but they do continue to support low-income families and individuals through donation of goods and services. Tzu Chi also continues its charitable actions on the global and social planes, doing everything from delivering disaster relief supplies around the world to fundraising for local hospitals and other organizations. There are many volunteers worldwide who participate in Tzu Chi charity actions; for example, in Vancouver alone there are more than 34 volunteer service stations!

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.tzuchi.org/global/master/index.html>.



When ten years turned to twenty, Tzu Chi turned its focus towards its other missions. It is important to note, however, that the ‘charity’ mission did not take a backseat. Tzu Chi did not *shift* its action, but rather *expanded* its actions so that while ‘charity’ missions were continued, the focus moved to its other missions – medicine, education, and culture.

Medicine naturally is an important part of the foundation since one of the most famous stories of Tzu Chi’s foundation is that a woman died simply because she could not afford the registry fee demanded by the only clinic nearby. Since the founding of Tzu Chi hospital in 1986, Tzu Chi has expanded its service to establish free clinics around the world.

As to education, Tzu Chi offers a complete chain of education from kindergarten to university in Taiwan. The Tzu Chi Academy for Humanities is also founded around the globe to spread the Tzu Chi ideals. Tzu Chi also focused heavily on “educating the rich and helping the poor”; this extension of education is reinforced by the claim that Buddha is essentially a teacher of the proper way of life.



Figure 4: The Tzu Chi College of Technology<sup>6</sup>



Figure 5: A donation box modeled after the constructing new Tzu Chi TV station: Da-Ai.

Last but not least of the four missions is Culture. Today, in its 38th year, Tzu Chi has been focussing on Culture. Tzu Chi’s culture center publishes a large variety of publications. The magazine *Rhythms Monthly* is devoted entirely to the cause of culture and history. Tzu Chi also operates a television station and a radio station in Taiwan.

### 1.3 From Taiwan to Canada

Founded in 1985, Tzu Chi’s first office outside Taiwan was in Los Angeles. Since then, chapters have been founded in many other countries including “Japan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, England, Austria, ... the United States, Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, Laos, Lesotho, and other countries” (<http://www.tzuchi.org/global/about/history.html>).

Tzu Chi’s first Canadian chapter was founded in Vancouver by Mr. Gary Ho, in 1992. The Vancouver branch grew steadily and is now the headquarters for all Tzu Chi offices in Canada. There are over 9,000 Tzu Chi members in Canada; over 7,000 live in the Greater Vancouver region. Tzu Chi has since set up branches in Toronto in 1994, Calgary in 1997, Mississauga in 2002, and finally, the latest branch in Montréal. The founding office in Vancouver has been a tremendous resource for Tzu Chi in Canada. It serves as a model which new Canadian branches of the organization follow in their own formation and has facilitated the process of adaptation of these branches by enabling particularly Canadian cultural differences to be understood and dealt with. That Tzu Chi had already been present in Canada ten years before the Montréal branch began meant that the founders of this new branch were already quite familiar

<sup>6</sup> Taken from Tzu Chi College of Technology Website: <http://www.tccn.edu.tw/admin/director/publicist/history/school-sight/index.htm>

with some of the challenges faced when bringing Tzu Chi to a new location in Canada. But, as any Canadian knows, while the Vancouver experience may provide a prototype for the Montréal branch, the context of Quebec definitely presents another set of new challenges.

## 2.0 Tzu Chi Montréal

The youngest Tzu Chi Canadian branch is its Montréal office. While we were conducting our field research, we participated in Tzu Chi Montréal's regular activities as well as one of Tzu Chi Montréal's biggest special activities – a donation drive for the homeless. We went into Tzu Chi specifically for research, but we ended up getting involved as well. Engaging in everything from helping them set up in their new location to participating as active volunteers, we were really able to feel out the organization, not only as a branch of an international organization, but also as a unique entity unto itself.

### 2.1 Certification

The branch in Montréal passed its certification in July of 2002 and was given its certificate by Master Cheng Yen on December 31st, 2002. The Montréal branch began its official operations January 1st, 2003, using a member's basement as an office. Three months later, the office changed locations to #502-1231 Rue Ste. Catherine Ouest, where it was located when we began our research project. In late February 2004, Tzu Chi made a move to a larger office space, which is now its present location: #300-486 Rue Ste. Catherine Ouest.

### 2.2 Foundations

The founder of Tzu Chi Montréal is Pi-Chen She. She is the first Tzu Chi member we came in contact with and subsequently the one who contributed incredibly to our understanding of the organization as a whole.

Ms. She has been volunteering with the Tzu Chi organization for the last 16 years. She volunteered with Tzu Chi in Taiwan until 1995, when she immigrated to Montréal, Canada. After immigration, she continued to volunteer for Tzu Chi for several years. In 2002, she finally decided to start a branch in Montréal. When asked why she now wanted to start a branch in Montréal, she gave several reasons. First, because the only branches of Tzu Chi were in Toronto and Vancouver, Ms. She had to undertake extensive traveling in order to continue volunteering for Tzu Chi. She grew tired of traveling, and wanted to have a branch closer to home. Second, Tzu Chi's success in foreign environments seems to be directly related to the numbers of Taiwanese and Chinese immigrants living there; since many of these immigrants are familiar with the organization and often is a slice of home abroad, they support its efforts. Ms. She feels that there is now a sufficient Taiwanese population in Montréal to support a new branch; and, as we describe shortly, a happy alliance with another resident would help her establish a network. Third, and perhaps most importantly, she says that it makes her happy to help others, and so it makes her happy to establish a branch here (F1). This branch is just getting started and Ms. She is incredibly enthusiastic about it.



Figure 6: Pi-Chen She: Montréal's Founder

As is the story of many organizations, simply establishing one is not enough to get the connections necessary to attain the community support vital to this type of organizations. Ms. She has begun establishing an entire Taiwanese network due to the assistance of one woman, who is the president of a large Taiwanese organization in Montréal. She had been living in Montréal for the last 37 years and had not heard of Tzu Chi. Her sister told her about Tzu Chi, and once, when she was looking for a place to have a meeting, her son suggested the Tzu Chi office. After being introduced to the organization, she proved to be an invaluable source of contacts to the Tzu Chi organization. Interestingly, she is a Christian and also a volunteer for Tzu Chi. She claimed that what she liked best about Tzu Chi was that she could be a frontline volunteer. This was a refreshing change since most of her service work consisted of sitting on and/or heading boards of various organizations (I4). A Christian woman facilitating the introduction of Tzu Chi to Montréal is only the beginning of the Christian-Buddhist alliance that marks Tzu Chi Montréal.

## 2.3 Office Space

Immediately following certification, Tzu Chi Montréal operated out of a basement. In April 2003, it moved into a small business suite in an office building in the heart of downtown. Located at 1231 rue Ste. Catherine Ouest, #502, this was where we began our research project with Tzu Chi. Pictures of their old office space are appended to this report (appendix I). The size of the office prohibited holding any large events to be held there, leading them to move to a different location. In mid-February of 2004, Tzu Chi signed a lease for a new office space, moving into it March 1st, 2004. It is still within Montréal downtown, yet this new office is at least two to three times bigger than the old location. This new office is beautiful and provides the much-needed space for activities, classes, and even big dinners. Our research crew was fortunate to help them set up.



Figure 7: Helping set up

Tzu Chi is now located at 486 Rue Ste-Catherine Ouest, #300, a large and open office suite in a large office building with many other businesses. The setting of Tzu Chi in an office building underscores the fact that Tzu Chi operates more like a business than a religious organization.

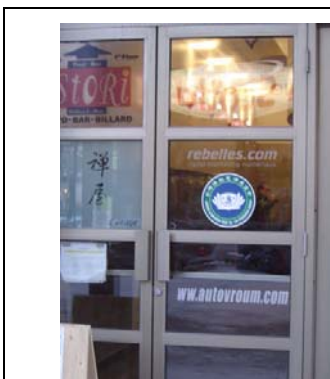


Figure 8: The Front Door on Ste. Catherine's



Figure 9: Inside Front Door



Figure 10: 'Little Touches' Decorations in the Front Hall

The layout of the office is as follows:

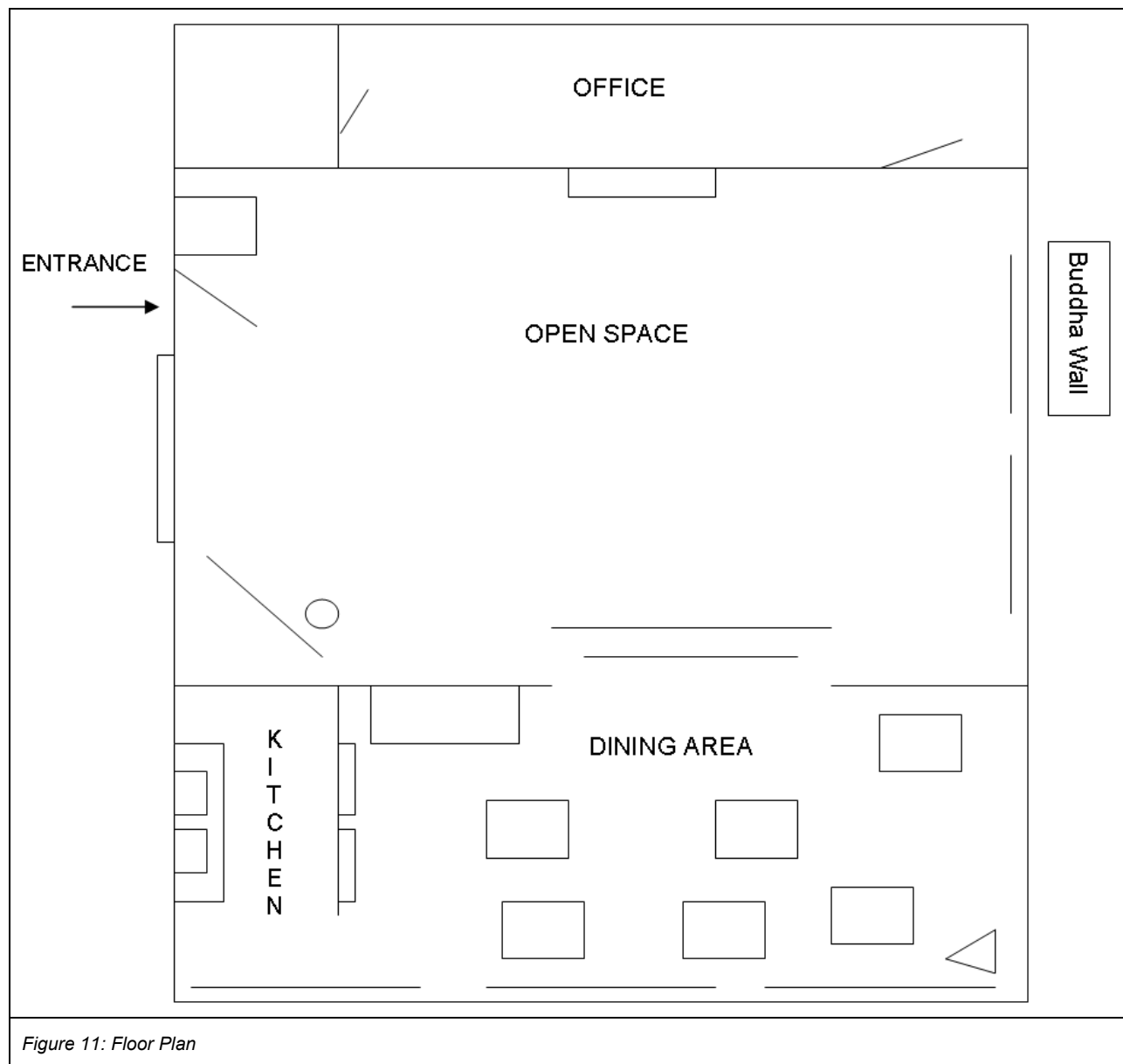
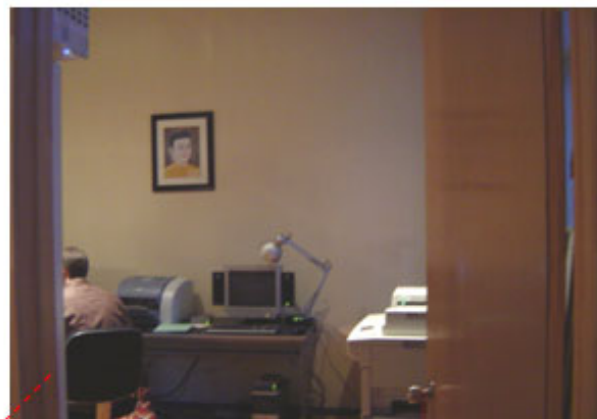
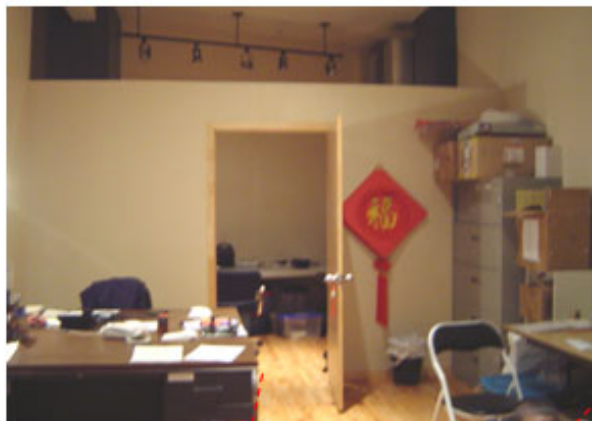


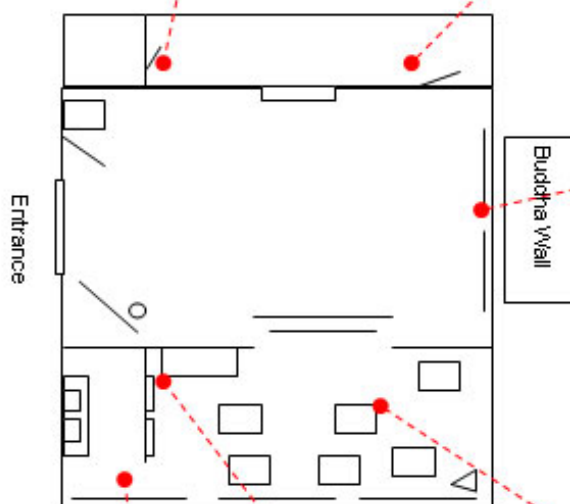
Figure 11: Floor Plan



**Figure 12: Second office, taken from inside the first. It is being used now as a multimedia resource room.**



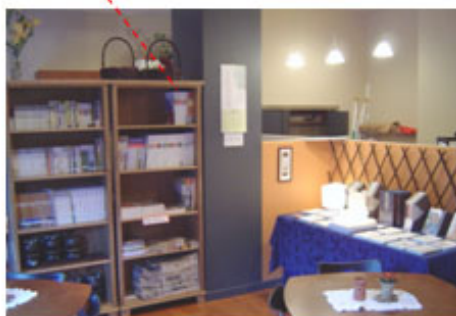
**Figure 13: Interior view of the office**



**Figure 14: Wall with Buddha. The shelf is used for offerings, sometimes apples or bananas**



**Figure 15: The Kitchen**



**Figure 16: The Library**



**Figure 17: The Dining Area**





Figure 18: The Entrance and Open Space



Figure 19: The Open Space. Translation of Chinese Characters (Left to Right): Kindness, Compassion, Joy, Unselfish Giving; Sincerity, Integrity, Trust, Honesty

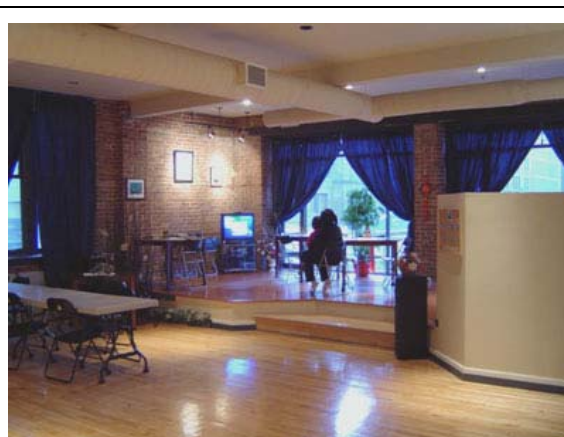


Figure 20: Dining Area, taken from other side (below), showing 2 members watching Tzu Chi Television Channel.

### 2.3.1 Library

Inside the office, Tzu Chi has a wide variety of books, magazines, and newspapers published by Tzu Chi in both Chinese and English. Those interested are more than welcome to borrow resources, but must, of course, return them.



Figure 21: Library

### 2.3.2 Tzu Chi Television

In the corner of the room is the television, which is turned on to Tzu Chi television. Tzu Chi has its own television station and network. The television is entirely in Chinese. The majority of the viewing selections are in the style of soap operas, dramatizations of real life stories. Tzu Chi focuses on personal narratives, wanting to share the experiences and real life stories of the members, volunteers, and people that they have helped.

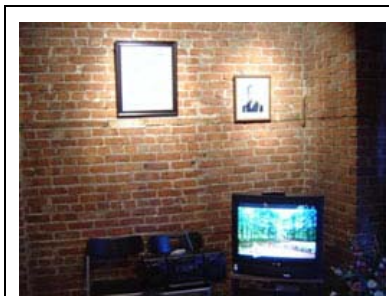


Figure 22: Tzu Chi TV

## 2.4 Membership and Volunteers

This section looks at how membership is attained, who the volunteers are, and the hierarchy within the organization.

While the membership of Tzu Chi worldwide is in the several millions, in Montréal there is a modest membership of 200 families. To become a member one must donate any amount of money to Tzu Chi Montréal on a monthly basis. When one makes their first donation, an account is set up, registered to their address; hence, membership is recorded by family and not individuals.

### 2.4.1 Membership and Funding

The Tzu Chi foundation's membership is gained through donation, regardless of the amount or frequency of the donation being made. These 'checkbook members' are the majority of the four million members of Tzu Chi foundation worldwide. The donation is used to fund the foundation's projects where it is raised. In Taiwan, there is a title of 'Honorable Board Members' for people who donate more than \$NT 1,000,000 (roughly equivalent to \$CAD 40,000 at the current exchange rate), although this title comes with no real power within the foundation.

The Tzu Chi Quarterly magazine claims that "Tzu Chi volunteers living in different parts of the world always carry out the Tzu Chi missions by raising funds and acquiring resources locally. The only things they acquire from Taiwan are seeds of love and endless blessings" (*Tzu Chi Quarterly*, Winter 2003: 63). From what we have seen, this is true. All of the funding for Tzu Chi Montréal is provided by donations from Montréal members<sup>7</sup>; and, unless otherwise specified by the donor, all donations go directly to the charity events. Donations may be given generally, in which case Tzu Chi will put the funds towards the projects that need it, or members may allocate their donations to specific charity events. All additional costs, including overhead administration and meals that are provided to volunteers, are incurred by the volunteers. The one exception was a private grant recently received by Tzu Chi which allocated funds specifically to cover the expenses of a new office, allowing them to move from their old, smaller office into the much larger, more open one.

The Tzu Chi members with whom Amanda Comstock spoke were very open about their sources of funding, and in fact offered up the information without being asked<sup>8</sup>. They were very explicit about the fact that all of the 'extras' such as meals provided before and after the activities were provided by the volunteers. Thus, volunteers often give not only time but also financial resources willingly, because they believe so strongly in the organization and what it is doing.

<sup>7</sup> "The main sources of funding and energy, however, come from the millions of Ciji [Tzu Chi] members who have no official role in the bureaucratic structure of the Foundation, but who give their money and time to organization activities. Many of these followers who flocked to the movement in the last decade are only 'checkbook members,' whose commitment does not extend beyond monthly contributions" (Huang and Weller 383).

<sup>8</sup> This information was gleaned during a conversation in the car on the way to the second day of the Homeless Distribution Drive (see next section), February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2004.

While members provide financial support, the activities are carried out by Tzu Chi volunteers. According to the Tzu Chi website, all members are encouraged to participate as volunteers, but not all will:

In the early days of the foundation, members seemed to participate less in Tzu Chi activities. However, in recent years members have broken away from the limited notion of 'I only need to give money and Tzu Chi will perform charity on my behalf.' (<http://www.tzuchi.org/global/inspiration/glossary/as12.html>)

## 2.5 The Organizational Structure

In our interviews with the founder of Tzu Chi Montréal office, we were repeatedly told that there is no hierarchy of any sort within Tzu Chi. That is, although there are different groups to take up different responsibilities, there are no group leaders among them.

The majority of the Tzu Chi members are 'lay disciples'. Believing in and attempting to adhere to the words of Cheng Yen, they are nonetheless ordinary people going about their ordinary lives. The hierarchy within the organization is not, then, divided like many religious organizations between monastic and laity; instead, like a job, hierarchy is considered by the amount of training one has had, and the amount of responsibility one is willing to undertake. All volunteers/members are considered equally, and in our experience, all volunteers contribute what they can to Tzu Chi and its activities. While Ms. She is the founder, she does not consider herself to be the 'leader' or the 'boss'. Indeed, all volunteers' opinions were encouraged. There does seem to be, of course, a natural 'hierarchy' based on time and experience, since those who have been with the organization longer and/or have volunteered with the organization more would simply be more familiar with modes of operation and so forth.

## 2.6 Volunteering

The volunteers (Che-Kon) are the people who are actively involved in helping out in Tzu Chi activities and events. Volunteers do not have to be members, nor members volunteers.

When one first begins to volunteer with Tzu Chi, one is given a vest to wear at any of the activities.



After one has volunteered with Tzu Chi for 50 hours, one receives the Tzu Chi uniform: blue shirt and white pants. This uniform is referred to as "Blue Sky and White Clouds". One also wears a name tag with a photo picture.



### 2.6.1 Attitude of the Volunteers

Tzu Chi members with whom we spoke insisted that the attitude of a volunteer is very important. Tzu Chi volunteers have to be gentle, polite, and grateful towards those who they are helping. In order to do so, the volunteers must take into account each new context in which they act. For example, in our interview with him, Mr. Ho (CEO of Tzu Chi Canada) illustrated the importance of this attitude by sharing his experience of delivering disaster relief to Iranians after a deadly earthquake. Those who suffered heavy losses, he pointed out, were wealthy and proud people; thus while they needed help, they were not themselves used to their new situation. They received help from many different groups, but how they were treated by certain groups hurt their fragile spirits and their pride. Though Tzu Chi volunteers must be kind and respectful to all of the people they help, this particular case demonstrates the positive effect of Tzu Chi's respectful and thoughtful attitude, which is to take care of people's hearts as well as their material needs. Furthermore, this case reveals that if the volunteers do not take the extra steps to respect the needy, they might further harm those they mean to help (F2).

Repeatedly stressed in Tzu Chi literature and demonstrated by the volunteers at Tzu Chi activities, the importance of volunteers' attitudes is highlighted in the emphasis on volunteers' behaviour. For example, during the charity activities at which we were present, we were shown that there is a specific manner in which Tzu Chi volunteers must distribute goods. First, it is necessary to smile – the smile is what they call "Tzu Chi Make-up". Smiling shows respect and compassion, inspiring hope and compassion in those receiving. One is supposed to give with both hands, which is also a sign of respect. When one gives something, s/he thanks the receiver and usually bows.

*Tzu Chi "Facial Lotion"*

When dealing with other people, Tzu Chi members try to make sure that their expressions are warm and affable. Ever since 1986, commissioners in Taipei have called this kind of sincere, amiable expression the "Tzu Chi Facial Lotion".

When Tzu Chi people apply it, they find that it has five functions:

1. Dispersing poisons: it eliminates the five poisons of greed, anger, ignorance, arrogance and suspicion.
2. Removing blemishes: it eliminates dirty spots within people's minds.
3. Invigorating cells: it can revitalize the cells of compassion hidden in the depths of the inner mind.
4. Inducing renewal: it exposes inherent evils; it makes amends for the past while it cultivates for the future; it is the self-renovation of the soul.
5. Maintaining youth and joy: it ensures that one's face is always radiant and full of youthful energy.

Any time you want, the Tzu Chi Facial Lotion can be applied automatically for you, free of charge or effort.

– Tzu Chi Glossary; trans. Mike Lee:

<http://www.tzuchi.org/global/inspiration/glossary/st05.html>

## 2.7 Commissioners

Master (Cheng Yen) is the spiritual support for Tzu Chi, and over 10,000 Tzu Chi commissioners are the practitioners. Up the mountains and down near the sea, the commissioners spread the seeds of great love. They are the direct representatives of Tzu Chi. (Ho 209)

One can make an even larger commitment to Tzu Chi by becoming a Tzu Chi commissioner. Commissioners are exactly like volunteers, but are responsible for representing Tzu Chi publicly, as well as fundraising and as seeking out situations of need. In order to become a commissioner, one must have a deep commitment to Tzu Chi. According to the website, commissioners must "have the right knowledge and right views, and have no bad habits" which amounts to following the ten precepts; "they must put in time to help the poor and teach the rich"; "they must have a deep understanding of 'take the Buddha's heart and the master's commitment as one's own,' carefully follow the Master's teachings, and be decorous and proper in their worlds and actions; and, they must maintain a sincere and trustworthy spirit in their work, and undergo at least six months of training"<sup>9</sup>. The Montréal office does not yet have a commissioner.<sup>10</sup>

In Tzu Chi's early days, anyone who recognized Master Cheng Yen's ideals and was willing could become a Tzu Chi commissioner after receiving guidance from a senior commissioner and Master Cheng Yen herself. However, as the foundation has grown larger, the selection and training is now a systematic process. A Tzu Chi commissioner has to be both member and volunteer for Tzu Chi, and perform 2 years of training and courses. The courses include a large sum of Buddhist rituals (e.g., how to dress in a Buddhist robe) and the Tzu Chi ideals.

<sup>9</sup> Translation Douglas Shaw; Tzu Chi Glossary: <http://www.tzuchi.org/global/inspiration/glossary/as14.html>.

<sup>10</sup> As of April 17, 2005, Tzu Chi Montréal office has 7 commissioners altogether. This is because the early members in Montreal, including Ms. She, took the required curriculum together, thus they became commissioners around the same time.



Another important curriculum for Tzu Chi commissioners are Tzu Chi's ten precepts, which are as follows: (1) Do not kill. (2) Do not steal. (3) Do not fornicate. (4) Do not lie. (5) Do not drink alcohol. (6) Do not smoke, use drugs, or chew betel nuts. (7) Do not gamble or speculate. (8) Follow the traffic rules. (9) Respect your parents and be moderate in speech and attitude. (10) Do not participate in politics or demonstrations. The first five are the traditional Buddhist precepts, and the last five were created by Master Cheng Yen as rules which help the practitioner adapt to modern society. The commissioners must follow all ten of the precepts, unlike the volunteers who are expected only to follow the first five

At the end of the training process, every new Tzu Chi commissioner receives a Buddhist name from Master Cheng Yen. Once one becomes a commissioner, one receives a Buddhist name and a new addition to their uniform: a Tzu Chi logo. This makes them easily identifiable and thus the 'public face' of Tzu Chi.



Figure 25: A poster of Tzu Chi's Ten Precepts in Montréal office



Aside from carrying out the Tzu Chi's four goals, one important mission for Tzu Chi commissioners is fund-raising. As Mr. Ho writes in his book, *The Trials*:

By requesting the commissioners to raise donations, Master [Cheng Yen] is asking them to raise people's hearts, to raise people's love and willingness to give. Through fundraising, commissioners can understand and care more for the members, by helping them to overcome their difficulties. While helping others, commissioners also gained the invaluable opportunity to improve and grow". (Ho, 211)

According to the literature, commissioners also used to head social networks of Tzu Chi volunteers within a given society, responding to situations and sending out orders along the lines. However, this method proved very ineffective when it came to responding quickly in emergency situations. The hierarchy was restructured so that responses could happen locally and more effectively. This meant that Tzu Chi had to start 'networking' with other local charity organizations, turning itself into a cooperative partner of the pre-existing charity organizations in the area. Furthermore, this encouraged Tzu Chi to think in terms of local communities, furthering the goal of building strong ties based on compassion and love. As the 'Ten Year Review' pamphlets from Tzu Chi Canada explains:

In 1998, Tzu Chi Canada reorganized its volunteer structure into different regional groups based on locality. Members were encouraged to participate in the local community affairs and to look out for one another. Through various community services, the residents not only knew each other better but were also better prepared to care for one other when circumstances required. The spirit of great love that reflects what Tzu Chi stands for was therefore embedded in communities, making them better places for people to live in.

<sup>11</sup> Taken from the Tzu Chi Global Website: <http://www.tzuchi.org/global/about/logo.html>. For more information on the eight-fold path, please refer to this webpage. For more information on Tzu Chi commissioners, please refer to: <http://www.tzuchi.org/global/inspiration/glossary/as14.html>.



As we shall shortly see, Tzu Chi Montréal works with local charity organizations as well, trying to find the best way for them to help those in need.

An interesting note: though most of the Tzu Chi commissioners at present are Chinese-speaking people, there are exceptional cases. One such case is an Iraqi Tzu Chi commissioner who is neither Chinese nor a Buddhist. He is said to recognize the Tzu Chi ideals and practice them, and thus has been given the title of a Tzu Chi commissioner.

As mentioned earlier in the section, the Tzu Chi Montréal office does not have a commissioner yet. The founder of Tzu Chi Montréal office has completed her training and will be certified as a Tzu Chi commissioner this summer (2004), becoming Montréal's first.

## 2.8 Activities and Classes

Tzu Chi volunteers work on two different fronts, both inside and outside the office. All of the administrative work is carried out by various volunteers; this includes everything from answering phones, to housekeeping, and paperwork. Many, if not all, of the volunteers take parts of the schedule for regular office hours, so there is always someone around to answer the phone. On Amanda's first contact with Tzu Chi, she met a woman who had recently joined the organization, who held a Master's degree in Library and Archive Science. She agreed to help Tzu Chi archive and catalogue their records, a project which she works on during her regular office hours. The volunteers are encouraged to contribute to Tzu Chi according to their skills and abilities; the diverse talents of the Tzu Chi volunteers have been beneficial to the organization, ensuring that the organization is well-run.

### 2.8.1 Regular Activities

Tzu Chi Montreal office has been expanding its regular activities and services since its change of address. According to the March 26th edition of the local Chinese newspaper, Luby Weekly, Tzu Chi Montreal office now offers a variety of classes and services to the public. Although none are made exclusive to people within the local Chinese society, the advertisements seen are all in Chinese language.<sup>12</sup>

#### Inside the office: Buddhist Activities

Unlike what is expected from a temple or an outlet of a religion, the Tzu Chi Montréal office doesn't focus on the Buddhist ritual as such; instead, the office emphasizes much more its charity mission to help others. The most 'Buddhist' activity at the office is the chanting of Lotus Sutra. This occurs every Thursday from 10:00 AM to noon. A vegetarian meal is served after the service. The service is conducted using a karaoke tape of the Lotus Sutra, chanted by the nuns of the Abode of Still Thought. According to a Tzu Chi member we interviewed, this service follows the same flow of what Master Cheng Yen's monastic disciples have been practicing for the last thirty years in the Abode.

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<sup>12</sup> The issue of language of racial demographics will be further discussed in the later section, **Observation and Discussion** of this report.

### Inside the office: Classes

Tzu Chi, in this past month, has begun to offer regular classes, which are also taught by volunteers. Here is a sampling of the classes that it now offers:

| Classes                    | Times                       | Cost |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------|------|
| Flower Arrangement         | 1st/3rd Tuesday; 7-9 pm     | \$15 |
| Sign Language Class        | Thursdays; 2-4 pm           | Free |
| Vegetarian Cooking Class   | 1st/3rd Sundays; 10-12 noon | \$2  |
| Tea Drinking/Serving Class | 2nd/4th Thursday; 7-9 pm    | Free |
| Still Thoughts Class       | 1st/3rd Wednesday; 7-9 pm   | Free |

The 'Still Thoughts' class studies the books of Aphorisms composed by Master Cheng Yen. "The contents of Master Cheng Yen's daily talks were recorded and sorted into succinct quotations by two groups of disciples who constantly accompanied her. These quotations became known as "Still Thoughts" (<http://www.tzuchi.org/global/publications/stillthoughts.html>).

In the near future (likely to be May), Tzu Chi Montreal is also planning to start a children's cultivation class. Aimed at preserving certain Chinese, or as they claimed, 'universal' moral standards such as Cooperation, Filial Piety, etc. (F3), this type of class is modeled after the Vancouver example, where games, videotapes, and activities were used to help kids develop these moral standards. The class will also teach both Chinese language and English. They hope to offer in tandem a class for the mothers, perhaps cooking classes or flower arranging.

### Outside the Office

Most of the time spent volunteering for Tzu Chi, however, is in carrying out front-line, direct actions which benefit the communities to which they belong. Tzu Chi Montréal has begun with just two regular activities: street-sweeping and weekly visits to the Chinese hospital.

The first regular activity they undertook was sweeping the streets in Chinatown, which they do every two weeks in warmer weather. On the street-sweeping days, Tzu Chi Montréal "adopts" the streets of Chinatown. Mr. Ho told us that sweeping the street is a cultivation of oneself (F2). There is no use sweeping the street if one does not sweep one's own heart of all the greed, hatred, jealousy and ill desire. When a local Taiwanese immigrant asked him why not just borrow a vacuum, he said: "A vacuum doesn't work! It is the movement, the action that is of importance; and only through action, can people change" (ibid). Street-sweeping also is a means by which Tzu Chi can connect with the community because they make themselves visible to others who might be interested in participating, and begins building a trusting relationship between the organization and its local community.

The other regular activity, in which the volunteers participate all year around, is a bi-monthly visit to the Chinese Hospital in Chinatown.

### Chinese Hospital

The Chinese Hospital visit is a regular event that Tzu Chi Montréal office has been carrying out since its foundation. The visits are made the first and third Fridays of the month. Here they

entertain the elderly folks who live in the hospital permanently, as a retirement home. From two to three in the afternoon, the Tzu Chi volunteers sing and perform a 'sign language' dance, and actively encourage participation from the elderly. Though the event only lasts an hour, it provides the elders with invaluable entertainment. In time of special holidays such as Christmas, Tzu Chi would also bring in some small gifts as they come to visit..

Both Ming and Amanda were able to attend, though on different days. Fortunately when Ming went he brought a camera with him. Unfortunately, the day he went was a dreary, rainy one so the number of volunteers was lower than normal.

Ming went to the Chinese Hospital the afternoon of Friday, March 5th. Only four Tzu Chi volunteers participated partly due to the heavy rain that day. The event started at around 2:00 PM, and the volunteers performed the sign-language dance with music for the old people there.

Amanda went on Friday, March 19th. She arrived at the Tzu Chi office at 12:45 pm. Six volunteers were present, eating lunch. She was also offered lunch and accepted. She and the volunteers left for the hospital at 1:20 and arrived at about 1:30.

After Ming and Amanda discussed their experiences with each other, we realized that despite the different numbers of volunteers and the different days we attended, the 'ritual' of the Chinese Hospital was the same.

Volunteers either met at the office beforehand and had lunch, or met up with each other in the hospital lobby. Each of the volunteers signed in on an attendance sheet, and then went upstairs to the room in which they would be performing.

Seated in the corner of the room was a statue of Kuan-Yin, the bodhisattva of compassion. Before any set-up began, we gave a few moments to pay her veneration. This was noteworthy because it was the only time that an overtly 'Buddhist' action took place.



Figure 26: The Sign Language Dance



Figure 27: Kuan-Yin, Bodhisattva of Compassion

Venerations were paid by bowing to Kuan-Yin, like shown in the diagram to the right. Such venerations indicate the group still takes seriously its commitment to Buddhism and Buddhist ritual, despite the rather secular rhetoric of the Montréal branch.

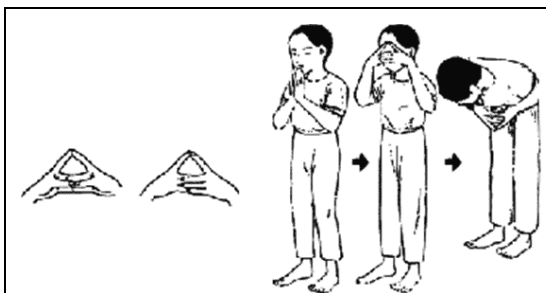


Diagram 1: Venerations<sup>13</sup>

After venerations were paid, some of the volunteers rearranged the chairs, while others went upstairs to wheel in or help walk in the elderly. The performance started at two. They had music playing, which were songs by Master Cheng Yen. They were written in Mandarin on a large flip-board so the audience could follow along. There was also a male volunteer present who would translate from Mandarin into Cantonese.



Figures 28: Sing-Along Songs

The sign language 'dance' meant several of the volunteers signed the words to the song, smiling big. They would perform exercise songs, waving their hands. They would take the hands of the elderly people, shake them and dance with them (they remained seated, of course).



Figures 29: Sign Language 'dance'

<sup>13</sup> Taken from the Tzu Chi Global Website: <http://www.tzuchi.org/global/about/etiquette.html>.

Afterwards, the volunteers escorted the elderly back to their rooms.

As our supervisor pointed out, this activity may remind the reader of the Confucian text on Filial Piety, story 17: "In story 17, a man named Lai-Tze dresses in colourful costumes, dances and sings in front of his elderly parents to entertain them"<sup>14</sup>.



Figure 30: Until Next Time...

## Philosophy

Like all Tzu Chi activities, there is always a specific philosophy behind the actions that are performed. One of the volunteers gave us a short explanation: she said that they visit the Chinese hospital to rouse the spirits of the elderly and to bring them joy. Tzu Chi, she claimed, wanted to dissolve all problems on the material and spiritual planes (I1). Ms. She gave us a much longer explanation.

First, she explained to us the reason and importance of visiting the old people living in the hospital: "Those people living in the Chinese Hospital are mostly without the care and love of their own family. It is important to relieve them of the negative emotion that they have, so they may peacefully walk towards death and rebirth" (F3). She explained that performing this action is just like performing a sutra. According to She, there are four major stages in life: birth; getting old; sickness; and death. The path from birth to death is long, she said, but the path from old age to death is very short. The elderly in the hospital have no one, besides nurses, to take care of them. They may become filled with feelings of resentment or hatred, wondering "Where is my child? Why are they not taking care of me?" By going to the hospital, the volunteers show them that there are people who care and who want to bring them joy. At the same time the volunteers hope to dispel feelings of hatred so that the elderly will walk on a 'peaceful road to death,' they also hope to understand suffering, seeing the elderly as a warning that the volunteers too shall get old<sup>15</sup>. In this way, the visits are acts of self-cultivation: every volunteer brings joy to the elderly while simultaneously coming to terms with the inevitability of aging and death. Additionally, by visiting the elderly when the volunteers are younger, they hope to establish a pattern that will continue so that when the volunteers become the elderly, they will have visits too.

### 2.8.2 Special Activities

Tzu Chi also engages in special activities a few times a year. Its first major fundraiser was for the Chinese hospital. Members made lotus ornaments and rice balls and sold them. They raised \$21,000 and were able to donate 13 power-beds to the hospital.

The second major charity event was targeted towards the homeless. Over the period of three days in February, they performed their largest effort yet: distribution of essential goods to the homeless and low-income families. We were, fortunately, able to attend.



Figure 31: Lotus Ornaments made by volunteers

<sup>14</sup> Comment made by Professor Victor Hori in his notes on the Field Research Draft, April 2004.

<sup>15</sup> For an explanation as to the importance of sign language in Tzu Chi, please see Appendix II.



### Homeless Distribution Drive

The major charity event was a dry goods donation to the homeless. Tzu Chi coordinated with a local charity mission in order to distribute the goods. This event was modeled on a similar event that the Vancouver Branch has been doing in conjunction with the Salvation Army. Tzu Chi Montréal decided against working with Armée de Salut (Salvation Army) Montréal because Armée de Salut didn't have a food bank, which was essential. Tzu Chi Montréal wants to establish a consistent working relationship with a charity organization which has a food bank because they want to do food bank activities in the future.

Tzu Chi worked with *Mission Bon Accueil* or *Welcome Home Mission* to distribute these goods. *Mission Bon Accueil* was founded in 1892 and is part of the Association of Gospel Rescue Missions. *Mission* has three centres: a kitchen and shelter for homeless men, a kitchen for homeless youth, and a food bank for low-income families. They allowed Tzu Chi to distribute bags at all three locations.



Figure 32: Bags waiting to be distributed

The event took place February 23rd, 24th, and 27th. Over 500 bags of essential goods were donated. Each bag contained a scarf/hat set, toothpaste, a toothbrush, soap, shampoo, and deodorant. The supplies were all purchased new, which is considered a sign of respect. It signifies that everyone is worthy of 'new things'. Receiving hand-me-downs all the time can manifest a mentality that one is worth less.

Each bag was carefully packed in advance for these days. We were told that each bag was carefully assembled and handled with respect, or 'Buddha's heart'.



Figure 33: Pavillon Macaulay<sup>16</sup>

The first day, February 23rd, Tzu Chi went to *Mission's* Homeless Men's shelter, Pavillon Macaulay: Service d'aide aux homes. Tzu Chi Montréal first worked with this shelter this past December, when it passed out winter coats. On this particular occasion, over 100 bags were given to individual men who had come to the mission for shelter for the night. There were 22 enthusiastic volunteers who came out for the event. There was also a photographer and a videographer present. They took pictures of the volunteers and the distribution, but they had to be very careful not to get any of the men's faces on film.

We arrived at the Tzu Chi new office at around 5:00 pm and were able to eat a meal with them. In fact, depending on the time of day of the activity, Tzu Chi always offers a meal either before or after. The food is all vegetarian and absolutely delicious!

We left the office in time to arrive at the shelter by 6:00 pm. Since there were so many volunteers, set-up happened very quickly. Tzu Chi set up their table next to the cafeteria. The set up included a red banner with characters, a Tzu Chi flag on the table, a Tzu Chi flag in the background, and a Canadian and a Quebec Flag. A boom-box was brought as well, which played Tzu Chi music: songs that Master Cheng Yen had written.

<sup>16</sup> Taken from the Welcome Hall Mission Website, <http://www.mbawhm.com>.





Figure 34: Tzu Chi Volunteers (Ming and Brad are on the far left)



Figure 36: Pi-Chen and another volunteer just before distribution. Note the flags in the background.

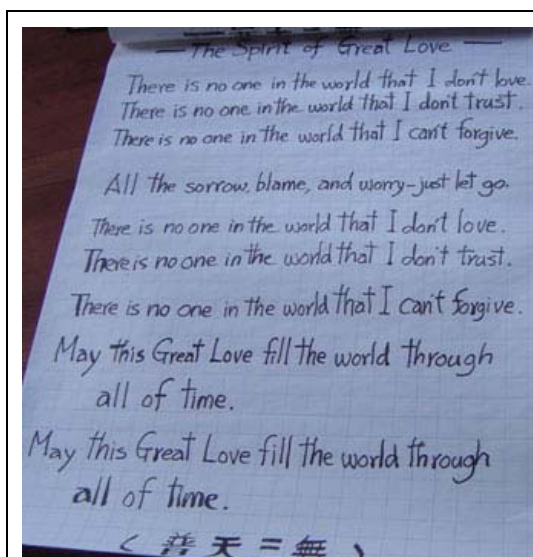


Figure 35: Song by Master Cheng Yen

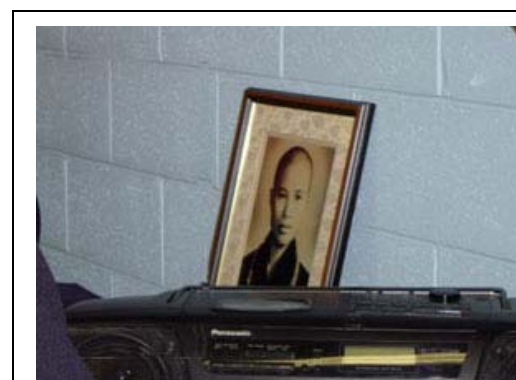


Figure 38: The place of Master Cheng Yen?



Figure 37: The Red Banner

A picture of Cheng Yen was brought to the distribution site, and in the picture above you can see a man fixing her picture to the flag pole. This caused a quiet stir with the organization and they were asked to take the picture down. The director of *Mission* said that this was a Christian organization and that they could “get into trouble” with a picture of Cheng Yen up. The Tzu Chi people did not have any problem taking down the picture; they moved it to behind the boom-box.

The distribution started at about 7:00 after the men had received a sermon. They filed through this area before heading outside. The set-up was really convenient and allowed the distribution to happen in an orderly manner. In an assembly line fashion, each person would receive a bag of supplies, a bag of homemade muffins and cookies, and an inspiration card. On one side, this card had the coordinates of the Tzu Chi foundation in Montréal; on the other, it had a message written in Chinese, French and English. Our research team was pushed to the ‘front-lines’ to pass out goods and also to field any questions that might come in, since we could speak French and English. The men thanked the Tzu Chi volunteers in return, often smiling and sometimes asking questions about the organization. One man even thanked the volunteers in Chinese.

The general overtone for the distribution was very pleasant. Every bag of the items was carefully wrapped and presented by smiling volunteers with both hands. The reason to use both hands is to show the takers respect. And another important thing is that the volunteers all said “thank you” to the people who received their help. This attitude is explained by Tzu Chi members; “Helping others makes us feel good, and so we should be grateful for them who give us the opportunities.”

February 24th, the second day of distribution, we went to Pavillion Kass: Le Roc street youth outreach, a kitchen for street youth. We went in the evening, arriving at about 6:30 pm.

For this distribution, there were ten volunteers present. The decrease was due to the director’s request that they bring fewer volunteers to the next event. Because the space that they are working in is so small, the director was concerned that their presence was a little overwhelming.

There was a misunderstanding about the time we were supposed to arrive and so set-up went a little less smoothly. The space that was allocated to them was much smaller, in front of a freezer in the cafeteria. But the Tzu Chi volunteers adjusted easily. The picture of Cheng Yen was in the background, behind the volunteers, providing moral support. She was not displayed prominently, due to the previous day’s request.



Figure 39: Pavillion Kass: Le Roc<sup>17</sup>

But, unlike last time, what caused the biggest stir was actually the presence of the flags. As we were setting up the flags, the director said that we had better not or “else there would be a revolution”. The flags were taken back out to the cars. The Tzu Chi flag was taken down temporarily, but then put back up. It remained on the table with no problems, and nothing more was said. Pi-Chen did not understand, though, why the flags needed to be taken down. Amanda explained to her that it was very likely that some of the kids were anarchists, and thus were opposed to government and symbols of government, like the flags. She found this very interesting and asked me to write up a report on this so that she could send it back to Taiwan. When cultural differences are discovered, the members around the world send the information back to Taiwan. Tzu Chi understands that all cultures are different and by understanding cultural particularities are able to carry out their volunteer work much more easily.

Although the space for the distribution was not as easily laid out as at the Pavillion Macaulay, the youth lined up and were given bags one by one, in the Tzu Chi manner.

<sup>17</sup> Taken from the Welcome Hall Mission Website, <http://www.mbawhm.com>.

There were about 100 bags distributed, and the youth were very thankful. There was even joking and laughing between the volunteers and the young adults. Ms. She was particularly enthusiastic about giving to the youth. When Amanda asked her why, she gave a couple reasons. First, she felt that it was very hard for youth to grow up when they don't have parents to support them and care for them. Second, she felt that the youth were the hope for tomorrow, and by giving to them, they will in turn help make society better. She expressed an interest in working with the youth more.

February 27th, we went to the food bank at Pavillion de Sur Courcelle. This food bank distributes bags of food to low-income families. The Tzu Chi volunteers were giving one bag per family, adding extra toothpaste and toothbrushes to individual bags.

The volunteers met at the office at about 11:00 am. We had a little bit of a difficult time finding the centre. When we arrived, we walked into an enormous open space. Tzu Chi had been given a huge amount of space with several tables. The space was partitioned off and really separated the volunteers and the goods from the people to whom they were giving. The staff at the Pavillion distributed tickets with numbers to individuals asking for bags. They distributed the exact number of tickets for the exact number of bags so that no one would get shorted.



Figure 40: Pavillion Sur de Courcelle: Service d'aide a la famille<sup>18</sup>

The system of distribution was coordinated in a similar assembly-line fashion, but the staff remained behind the tables, exchanging tickets for goods. This distribution felt very different from the other two distributions, where the spirit was more one of giving than one of exchange.

It seemed that this distribution was the least satisfying for the volunteers for a few reasons. First, in this distribution, the Tzu Chi volunteers felt much more removed from the people they were helping. Part of the Tzu Chi philosophy is to engage directly with the people who need help; this time, the giving was mediated through a complicated system of exchange. Second, one volunteer expressed concern that the people who were present here were already being helped a considerable amount by the government, and that perhaps Tzu Chi would do better to concentrate their efforts on those who may be more in need, and who are being overlooked.

### Helping Those in Need

Tzu Chi looks to help those in need who are often overlooked or neglected by the government. They want to help those who are 'really' in need. Usually they find out about a situation because somebody comes and reports a situation to them. It is difficult for Tzu Chi in Montréal to find those cases in need because first, those who would report situations of need are probably not yet familiar with the Tzu Chi foundation and second, the volunteers of Tzu Chi Montréal are mostly first generation immigrants, and are themselves not familiar with the situations of need in Montréal. Tzu Chi seems to understand that every place is different and has different problems; for example, the Ten Year Review states:

In response to the local conditions of Canada, the format and structure of the charity work of Tzu Chi in Canada has been greatly modified. In the early days, charity work focused on material assistance, but gradually much emphasis has also been placed on spiritual counseling and emotional care. Besides providing emergency materials and money to needy families, our volunteers also visited lonely seniors, sick children in hospitals ... Through providing entertainments, massaging and feeding the elderly or the disabled, we intended to soothe suffering hearts and bring light to ever dark corner. ('Ten Year Review' 6)

<sup>18</sup> Taken from the Welcome Hall Mission Website, <http://www.mbawhm.com>.

Clearly, Tzu Chi has been successful at responding to local problems once the local conditions, i.e., cultural context, is properly understood. Thus, the Montréal Tzu Chi volunteers are looking for more information that will give them clues about those in need. One idea we heard was that they would perhaps like to work with First Nations People. As to the extent of charity Tzu Chi wants to offer, the generous spirit of Tzu Chi is reflected in She's philosophy: she'd "rather make a mistake and give too much, then to make a mistake and not give when it was needed" (F3).

## 2.9 Numbers and Demographics

According to the Tzu Chi Montréal office, the membership consists of more than 200 families. The Montréal branch will, depending on the activity, draw anywhere from 8 to 30 volunteers. Special events, such as the dry goods distribution to the homeless, tend to attract more volunteers, so there will be about twenty to thirty volunteers; for regular events, like the Chinese Hospital visits, there are about five to ten volunteers who come. Through our attendance at regular and special events, interviews, as well as some time spent in the office, we were able to become familiar with the general demographics of Tzu Chi Montréal.

### 2.9.1 Gender

The majority of the volunteers were women; the male volunteers were usually spouses of other volunteers. When Amanda asked Pi-Chen about the reasons she felt so many women were involved, she pointed to three primary reasons: first, that women have more 'endurance,' tolerance, and patience and are able to carry out hard work; second, as housekeepers, women do not have to worry about business and thus have the time to participate; and third, there is a Buddhist precept which says that while monks may have male and female disciples, nuns may only have female disciples (I2).

It has been suggested by Huang and Weller that Tzu Chi's "particular appeal to women" may be due to its "combination of an emphasis on action over philosophy, an extension of maternal love beyond the family, and support for dealing gently with problems at home" (386). While this may be the case, it must be noted that this was not the explanation Amanda received when she inquired about the large number of women involved in Tzu Chi. Instead, two different reasons were given: first, Tzu Chi was founded by a Buddhist nun, who may only have female disciples; and second, because women are traditionally the householders, they have less worry about 'feeding the family' (I2)<sup>19</sup>.

### 2.9.2 Ethnicity

All of the members are Chinese; most are Taiwanese, though there are some 'mainlanders' and people from Hong Kong'. Most are first-generation immigrants and many did not get involved with Tzu Chi until after they moved to Canada.

### 2.9.3 Language

The language most spoken was Mandarin, and there were also some volunteers who were able to translate into Cantonese when it was necessary (e.g. at the Chinese hospital). Interestingly, Cheng Yen has been criticized for speaking Taiwanese, which is considered by some to be a political statement. Abroad, however, Tzu Chi business is carried out in Mandarin.

When necessary, some of the volunteers spoke English and French. The language barrier is one of their biggest challenges.

<sup>19</sup> It seems that She is referring to the fact that women are not the breadwinners of the family; it does not seem she means her statement literally, for surely women are typically charged with the physical labour of 'feeding the family,' e.g., cooking.

#### 2.9.4 Age

The average age of the volunteers is middle-to-older age, approximately 35-60 years old. The youngest volunteer was in her 30s. They are actively looking to recruit younger members. Attracting younger people is very important to Tzu Chi because the youth will be able to bridge the language and culture gap between the current volunteers and Montréal communities.

#### 2.9.5 Religion

As mentioned in the introduction, Tzu Chi can be seen as an engaged outlet for Buddhist cultivation practices. However, it is not the case that all volunteers who come to Tzu Chi are Buddhist. For example, one volunteer felt that her involvement in Tzu Chi was complementary to her Falun Gong cultivation; another volunteer was a Christian woman involved because she wanted to engage in direct-action volunteering. Thus, while Tzu Chi is founded on Buddhist principles, not all of the volunteers are Buddhist. However, the question of 'religion' seems to be something that is not discussed, leaving different volunteers with different understandings of the extent of the 'religiosity' of the organization. Veneration paid to Kuan-Yin, though, clearly demarcates the organization as Buddhist, but this seems to have little to no conflict with other religions, speaking not only for the Montréal branch, but also worldwide.



### 3.0 Analysis

#### 3.1 Why are people members?

A major question which must be explored is why people become members of the Tzu Chi organization in Montréal. We found several reasons:

##### 3.1.1 Front-Line Volunteering

The most compelling part of Tzu Chi is that they are directly and actively engaged in the Montréal community. It offers an opportunity to volunteer and to 'give back' to the community in which they live. This is satisfying for some simply because it is a direct action, different from bureaucratic positions inside of charitable organizations. One volunteer told me that she was quite active in many organizations, but she participated in the administrative aspect or would chair boards. Tzu Chi was a good outlet for her to do 'front-line' volunteer work.

##### 3.1.2 Personal Cultivation/Religious Reasons

"Spiritual Cultivation cannot be found in the realm of words and writings. Apply the lessons of daily encounters with people and events to your practice, and gather the strength of equanimity. This equanimity will cultivate wisdom" (Jing Si 41).

This reason is the one most touted by Tzu Chi. The very foundations of Tzu Chi are to understand the truth of Buddhist philosophy by experiencing and acting in the world. The primary reason for participation is to help build a world of Great Love and compassion; through direct action, the volunteers not only continue a lifelong process of self-cultivation, but also help to enrich and cultivate the world. By seeking out situations of need, volunteers themselves come to understand suffering and impermanence, helping them to reckon with the truth of the world. By helping others in their day to day lives, the Tzu Chi people hope to inspire compassion and love with those helped, so that they too can walk the 'peaceful' road of love and compassion. Hopefully, a domino effect will occur, inspiring and uplifting the entire world. It is no wonder why the Tzu Chi people very often call each other 'Bodhisattva'. As Master Cheng Yen said: "Bodhisattvas are not idols made of wood; real Bodhisattvas are people who eat, talk, work and relieve suffering in times of need" (Jing Si).

##### 3.1.3 Social Networking and Friendships

There is also a great social network unfolding inside (and outside) of Tzu Chi. Members who recruit new members are responsible for those members. One of the members we spoke with has formed great friendships with her recruits, calling them on the phone and keeping up with them. Through this, she cultivated great friendships for which she feels most grateful. She considers these friendships to be great gifts. This member seems to quite clearly reflect Master Cheng Yen's aphorism: "A fulfilling life is not preoccupied with material objects, prestige, and power. A fulfilling life is filled with true friendships, sharing, and caring for each other" (Jing Si 187).

##### 3.1.4 Cultural Preservation

Furthermore, many of the members did not get involved with Tzu Chi until they moved to Canada. Considering most of the members are Taiwanese, and all of them are Chinese, Tzu Chi is a place where people from similar backgrounds who speak the same language can meet each other. While they are helping other people, they create a space in which they can preserve elements of their culture.

##### 3.1.5 Joy and Happiness

Master Cheng Yen once said that "It is more of a blessing to serve others than to be served" (Jing Si 69). As if this were true, a great enthusiasm and happiness surrounds Tzu Chi activities. Emanating from the

other volunteers and those being helped, Amanda found that when she was participating, she felt 'swept up' in this feeling of happiness and excitement. In her experience with Tzu Chi, she found that it was truly enriching to feel that you are helping people who need to be helped, and giving to those who want and need to receive.

### 3.2 Adaptation

"Kindness and compassion do not differentiate among race, color, geography, or politics. So long as our ears hear the suffering of living beings or our eyes see their hardships, we naturally reach out our hands to help. Kindness is bringing joy to people through gentle giving. Compassion means doing all we can to relieve people of their suffering" (Winter 2002: 89)

Tzu Chi has had to adapt to every new environment in which it grows. In Taiwan, Tzu Chi operates as a major charity organization, benefiting the people of Taiwan in many ways. Like the Buddhist principle of equanimity, however, the love and compassion that Tzu Chi Foundation has transcends national borders. When Tzu Chi comes abroad, it must adapt to the situations of a new country, new environment, and new culture. In Canada, the Tzu Chi networks must be carefully constructed and work with the charity organizations which are already in place. But what Tzu Chi provides that other charity organizations do not is the opportunity for Chinese immigrants to work together to effect positive change in their new community. Indeed, Ms. She talked to us quite a bit about the immigrant's responsibility to their new home: she said that there is new sky above us and new soil below us, and we must be grateful and we must help this new society if we can (F3).

One of the most important issues which arose in this field research is how Tzu Chi, a Taiwanese cultural phenomenon, translates itself to enter Canada. As we have observed, most of the core members within the organization are first generation immigrants, particularly Taiwanese immigrants. This has created several challenges for Tzu Chi branches outside of Taiwan.

First, legal barriers complicate the standard charity operations of Tzu Chi Taiwan. According to our interviews with Tzu Chi members, Tzu Chi in Taiwan would give cash relief to low-income families if other channels could not meet the families' needs (F3). However, Canadian laws restrict charity organizations' visits to low-income families and count any cash relief to them as part of the family's taxable income. Cash relief, therefore, would reduce the help these parties receive from the government. Thus, in Canada, Tzu Chi was forced to change its method in charity operations.

Second, language barriers present quite a challenge in many ways. To those immigrants who can barely speak English, it becomes even more difficult to promote their cause and activities in the bilingual environment of Montreal. This limits Tzu Chi's ability to promote itself and to make house visits. Part of the Tzu Chi's belief is to not only help people in the material level, but also care for them at a spiritual, emotional level. This is thus made more difficult with the language barrier.

Furthermore, the fact that most of the information on Tzu Chi Montréal is available only in Chinese<sup>20</sup> seemingly limits the number of people that Tzu Chi can reach. One must ask who Tzu Chi Montréal is trying to reach then. The classes offered such as sign-language class, sutra chanting, or vegetarian cooking are conducted very much within the Taiwanese/Chinese society. Yet the charity events such as the winter distribution we have observed are aimed at helping the local population in general. This confirms Julia Huang's observation in her field research on Tzu Chi branches in Boston, New York and Malacca: the branches may have "consisted of ethnic Chinese, but [they] always extended their charity beyond ethnic Chinese" (Huang, 147). Tzu Chi may be able to overcome the language barrier if they continue their extensive cooperation with local charity organizations, as they did in the Homeless Distribution Drive.

Cultural differences present challenges to both the internal goals and the external actions of Tzu Chi. First, as is the case with many organizations abroad, Tzu Chi in Canada picks up the new and two-fold

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<sup>20</sup> The Tzu Chi Montréal website is written entirely in Chinese: <http://www.tzuchi.ca/montreal>.

task of preserving the Chinese heritage within the immigrant community<sup>21</sup> and promoting it within the local community. However, Tzu Chi is not an insular organization, unconcerned with the cultures of others. On the contrary, Tzu Chi also gathers information about the local cultures to send back to Tzu Chi Taiwan, contributing to their ever-increasing cultural understanding.

In order to carry out effective action, Tzu Chi Montréal must come to an understanding about Montréal. As mentioned several times in this report, this understanding has not yet been achieved. Tzu Chi Montréal is actively looking for ways of bridging this gap between the public and themselves, and is looking to recruit younger members who perhaps grew up in Montreal, who are familiar with English and/or French and have a better understanding of the Montréal culture. The Tzu Chi members feel it is the youth who will be able to bring Tzu Chi to the public. In her research, Julia Huang has affirmed this position. As a member said to Huang, “Tzu Chi youths are our future, because of they study [outside Taiwan] and their cross-ethnic social connections. When they are out of school and start working, their classmates, colleagues, and friends support them” (Huang, 145).

However, Huang also observes that “these college students are still basically socializing only with other Taiwanese and local Chinese born youth” (Huang, 145). Ming suggests, however, that the goal of preserving Chinese culture perhaps contradict the hope of having children or youth acting as a bridge between the two cultures. Based on his personal experience and observation as Taiwanese-born student and receiving education in Canada, he finds it very difficult to maintain two distinctly different heritages. His friends who share his background are either so assimilated to Western culture that they could not understand Chinese, or kept within groups of other Taiwanese and thus distant from the local culture. The very idea of promoting Chinese culture within the next generation is, in his opinion, limiting children’s ability and discouraging their efforts to integrate into the local society. He agrees that the youth who received education outside Taiwan do offer a better understanding of the local society than their parents, however it has yet to be seen how effective this would be in terms of bridging the two cultures.

Furthermore, in order for Tzu Chi to be successful, Montréal must come to an understanding of it. If we consider that Tzu Chi emerged in a Buddhist society that takes certain ideas for granted (e.g., karma, rebirth, etc.), then it seems in Canada there might be a conceptual barrier directly related to cultural difference. Not only is the public of Montréal generally unfamiliar with Buddhism, but even those familiar with Buddhism may be unfamiliar with the ‘engaged Buddhism’ of Tzu Chi. ‘Engaged Buddhism’ has been used by Western scholars to describe a Buddhism which serves as the philosophical legitimation for certain social and political actions; however, the last precept of Tzu Chi is to “not participate in politics or demonstrations”. In the 90s, the Nationalist government of Taiwan even offered Tzu Chi commissioners the chance to be Parliament members, which Master Cheng Yen refused and prohibited.

North Americans grow up understanding the world around them by looking at it through the lens of analysis which they are given. Certain philosophical assumptions are put into practice everyday without one even being conscious of it, because those assumptions are considered ‘natural’ or ‘normal’. Because Tzu Chi does not share the same philosophical assumptions as many North Americans, it became quite a challenge for Amanda to understand the philosophical framework of Tzu Chi as well as its apolitical stance in a world where so much suffering seems to be the fault of bad politics. If the biggest challenge facing Tzu Chi is how to introduce itself to a new social and cultural context and how to benefit this new society, then it seems the members must make very clear the ideas and concepts which undergird their work, especially in a context which does not share them. After much research and questioning, Amanda was able to overcome her own cultural blinders in order to understand the underlying assumptions which inform the practical action of Tzu Chi.

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<sup>21</sup> An important task of the organization, cultural preservation seems to be very important to the members of Tzu Chi. This is witnessed by the fact that many of the members, even those who were familiar with Tzu Chi, did not get involved until they immigrated to Canada.

### 3.3 Buddhism as a Reason to Act

Having study Buddhism previously, Amanda quickly understood that Tzu Chi's direct action was a reformation of the previous monastic ideal of Buddhism. Whereas earlier Buddhism called for monks withdraw from society in order to effectively practice Buddhism and generated support of monasteries from the support of the local laity, Tzu Chi takes Buddhism directly into society. Society, with its corruption and impurities, is not something from which to withdraw; but rather the very place where one needs to 'practice one's heart' (F3). Indeed, as pointed out earlier, actions performed by Tzu Chi are seen as the performance of a *sutra*. Instead of worshiping and reciting *sutra*, the "sutra is the road for us to walk, to actually work on things, [and] to [help us] understand. Buddha didn't write them for us to read; he wrote them for us to work on" (F3).

Just as the *sutra* is not an object of worship, neither is the Buddha though he is revered. Buddha is appreciated because he is a teacher; by following his lead and learning his lessons, each practitioner purifies him or herself. This is done by performing compassionate actions, not by worshiping the Buddha. This seems to be why "Cheng Yen believes that Buddha is not there to worship, but there to teach, to spread love, and to take care" (F3). If all the compassionate actions of Tzu Chi are performed in the spirit of the lessons of the Buddha, is this not how he continues 'to teach [us], spread love, and take care [of us]'? This understanding is very similar to the explanation Ho gives of Kuan Yin in his description of the beginnings of Tzu Chi:

If only to gather 500 people, isn't that why Kuan Yin Bodhisattva has a thousand eyes and a thousand arms? If these 500 people are spread in every corner of the world, wouldn't this be the Kuan Yin Bodhisattva's ability to be and to manifest herself everywhere? ...Though there are not 500 people to be found in this instant, these 30 [the first disciples] are the start. (Ho 53 - 54)

Clearly, Tzu Chi understands that it is in action that the Buddha, Kuan Yin and the teachings of Buddhism become manifest. Thus, not simply a matter of study, one must also engage in practice within society to learn the true lessons of Buddhism. Performance of compassionate action is self-cultivation. If following the lessons of Buddha, 'everyone can be a Buddha' (F3), then Buddhism is seemingly a simple philosophy of living. If neither Buddha nor sutras are there to be worshipped, and if, in fact, Buddha was simply a teacher of a philosophy of life, then why were we studying this organization in our *Chinese Religions* course? Is Tzu Chi really 'religious' at all?

Amanda came in with the assumption that since Tzu Chi called itself 'Buddhist' that it was very 'religious'. This made it difficult for her to understand how people of different religions could get involved and how a Buddhist organization could hope to spread its message to a primarily Judeo-Christian environment. In North America, we tend to conceptualize religions as mutually exclusive and based on faith in 'something greater,' almost 'supernatural'. These understanding of Buddha and Buddhism did not exist in Tzu Chi. Instead; this active, practical Buddhism could serve as a complementary practice to any religion. The reverence of a 'higher power' was not put into the form of a ritual worship; rather, because the lessons of Buddha are manifest in action, revering the Buddha means practical, compassionate action. It is that action that is the manifestation of the Buddha – not as a God or a higher power – but seemingly as a concept—the goodness of compassionately loving of all sentient beings.

Amanda also conceptualized religion as wanting to 'convert' all people to a single religion, which made her wary of the 'religious' aspect of Tzu Chi. Surely it would be a contradiction to have compassion for all sentient beings but not respect their religious decisions. Again, this conception was a cultural blinder. The Tzu Chi mission is not one to 'convert' people to Buddhism; rather, "We're here to educate people so that they will have love in their hearts" (F3). As She points out, "If you have a good heart, it doesn't matter what religion you are" (F3).

Tzu Chi does not require its members to be Buddhist. In fact, the majority of people involved in Tzu Chi foundation worldwide are lay, and additionally, many are not even Buddhist!<sup>22</sup> However, the organization

<sup>22</sup> In *Tzu Chi Quarterly*, Winter 2003, there is an article discussing the construction of Tzu Chi schools in Indonesia. The director the school is Catholic, but he "believes that all religions share a common goal – the pursuit of peace and a better life for human beings"

is and will clearly remain Buddhist because it was this religion that inspired and influenced Master Cheng Yen to create the organization in the first place. Furthermore, it is this 'religion' which contains the "principles of life and the teaching of life" (F3), which are that an individual is responsible for herself and for taking care of his own heart through self-cultivation. Unlike some concepts of the Christian God, Buddha will not come to save you; Buddha is present in your actions. While Tzu Chi Montréal may paint this Buddhism as a 'philosophy of life' or a 'form of education' (F3), it is clear that Tzu Chi performs its work as a practical application of the Dharma. That is, regardless of whether its members are religious, Tzu Chi's actions are conceptualized within the philosophical framework of Buddhism. This point is perhaps best illustrated through the discussion of Tzu Chi's apolitical stance.

### 3.4 Staying Out of Politics

"Accept with a heart of joy the obstructions brought on by karma which were caused by past actions; thus minimizing the retribution of bad karma" (Jing Si 137).

Buddhist understandings of karma and rebirth play heavily into Tzu Chi philosophy. The situation into which one is born is due to the karma that the person has accumulated in previous lives. When one is in a bad situation, one can only attempt to get oneself out of it by performing good deeds, cultivating oneself, and hence, generating good karma. But it is not for the karma that one is supposed to perform; rather, it is through the generation of love and compassion that one gets closer to realizing one's own 'Buddha heart'; this love and compassion is generated not only through personal cultivation but also necessarily requires action in society.

Tzu Chi also has a strictly apolitical stance, refusing to participate in political demonstrations or protest against laws in place. The idea behind this is that karma determines what kind of society one is born into, and the government of a society is determined by collective karma. If one is living in a society with a bad government, it is because of the bad collective karma of that society. The way to combat this, then, is to do kind deeds out of love and compassion, generating more love and compassion. This will generate good karma and will eventually change the whole of society itself. Ultimately, we must treasure and be grateful for all of the blessings that we have received by making our own blessings and helping others. What we have in this life, I was told, we come with it. We must use it to repay society and not waste it.

Tzu Chi wants to inspire "people's good heart" because everyone has a good heart inside. This can only be inspired through practice and work. When all society becomes inspired, then hazards will cease to happen within society; ultimately, when the world becomes harmonized, then there will cease to be disasters in the world. Thus we understand Master Cheng Yen's three major goals as interconnected: one must purify one's mind and inspire others to purify their own through loving kindness; once many peoples' minds become purified, eventually society will be harmonized; once all societies are harmonized, the world will become free of natural disasters.

While Tzu Chi's starting point for action arises from a specifically Buddhist worldview, there can be no question that one does not have to be Buddhist to participate. What differentiates Tzu Chi from traditional organizations in North America is not only the reasons why it give but also the manner in which it gives: attempting not only to help by giving material support, but also to help by inspiring love and compassion within the hearts of all in society.

While Ming did not have the same conceptual difficulties Amanda did, he did also find a seeming contradiction between the religious roots and practices of Tzu Chi and its current seemingly secular rhetoric in Montréal and other places abroad. He points out that there is no doubt that Master Cheng Yen and Tzu Chi follow the path of humanistic Buddhism laid by the great Buddhism reformer, Master Taixu.

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(55); "although he was Catholic, he appreciated the ideals of Tzu Chi's humanistic education". Many of the volunteers didn't realize that Tzu Chi was Buddhist until they went through the training courses. But, though Tzu Chi was 'Buddhist', the volunteers realized their goal was "not to preach religion, but to impart knowledge and spread love" (Winter 2003:50-1). 85% of Indonesia is Muslim; another active member of the school said that Tzu Chi was actually helping to recover the lost values of traditional Indonesian culture: "Communication, union respect, understanding – these are all traits stressed in our traditional Indonesian culture. Tzu Chi's educational ideals are helping us to recover the essential qualities of our culture" (Winter 2003: 50-1).



The idea of Buddhism should act outside the monastery and extend its benefit to the common people is certainly not original to Tzu Chi, but started with the reform movement that Master Taixu promoted. This is not surprising considering Yin Shun, Master Cheng Yen's master, was a direct disciple of Taixu.

On the other hand, Tzu Chi Foundation has gone to great distance to paint itself as a secular foundation. There is very limited Buddhist ritual done in every branch abroad, and being a Buddhist is never a requirement for membership. During our interviews with the founder of Tzu Chi Montreal, Ms. She more than once told us that Tzu Chi is not a religion, but a charity foundation founded on Buddhist concepts and love. She told us that the Master Cheng Yen said, religion is but the teaching and the principle of life, and Buddha is but an educator to teach us how to live a better life.

Yet as much as Tzu Chi is a secular organization, Buddhist concepts are found everywhere within the structure and the literature of the organization. For example, part of the regular curriculum of becoming a Tzu Chi commissioner is to learn about the Buddhist sutras and rituals; also Tzu Chi commissioners are given a Buddhist name upon certification.

Clearly the extent of religiosity of Tzu Chi is ambiguous. In Hualien, Taiwan, Master Cheng Yen teaches many ordained nuns in her Abode of Still Thoughts, very apparently Buddhist. However, abroad it seems that Tzu Chi attempts to downplay the religious aspects of Tzu Chi, a gesture that shows it understands the gravity of 'religion' in other countries and the wariness with which new religions are approached. To play up Buddhism as merely a philosophy which supports their actions, it seems this is the route Tzu Chi must take if it hopes to branch out into the Montréal population at large. It has already begun by building networks with Christian charity organizations. Indeed, working with Christian organizations is going to be a necessity in Montréal as all of the charity organizations here are Christian. This does not seem to be problematic at all, as the focus of Tzu Chi is really on rendering good services and deeds to individuals and society regardless of the label that is placed upon it. Though, as witnessed during the Homeless Distribution Drive, some negotiation between these religions is going to have to take place.

Buddhism is not the only 'religion' to which Tzu Chi must tip its hat. One can clearly see a Confucian influence on Tzu Chi as well. First, this is witnessed in the heavy emphasis on filial piety: not only is filial piety the eighth of the ten Tzu Chi precepts, but it is also the main theme of Tzu Chi's first musical production, "Sutra of Profound Gratitude toward Parents". The Still Thoughts (*Jing Si*) textbooks used by the children's cultivation classes also employ heavily Confucian stories to illustrate Chinese or Tzu Chi moral values. This use of Confucian text can also be traced to the early days of the foundation, when part of the curriculums on which Master Cheng Yen would lecture her disciples was the Four Classics of Confucian texts, such as the Analects. Master Cheng Yen's disciples not only had to read the Analects, but also had to memorize them.

## 4.0 Conclusions

Based on the above discussions, we can argue that the Tzu Chi Foundation is the result of the long trend of humanistic Buddhism. Master Cheng Yen, a granddaughter disciple of Master Taixu, interpreted Master Taixu's belief into a large enterprise that promote humanistic actions with its roots in Buddhist logic and belief. Master Taixu used to lecture monks with the modern western knowledge, and this is now inherited by the cultural exchange activities of Tzu Chi. Tzu Chi Montreal office carries out this trend and at the same time adapts itself becoming more secular to cooperate with other local Christian charity organization.

What we have seen in Tzu Chi as it has come to Montréal is indicative of the way any idea from a different context must adapt and translate to make itself understood within the new context. Necessarily, Tzu Chi Montréal must absorb elements of Montréal in order to carry out its work effectively, just as we have seen with the religious history of China, new religions must always adapt themselves to the current cultural climate, absorbing those elements of society which will ensure the survival of the religion. Clearly, the same thing is happening now with the Buddhist movement, as Buddhism is brought into society as a means of ameliorating it. The interesting part will be not only to see how Tzu Chi and its 'engaged' Buddhism adapts to Montréal, but also to see how Montréal adapts to Tzu Chi. It is with great anticipation that we look forward to seeing the Tzu Chi Montreal office grow to become an influential organization beyond the immigrant community and bridge the loves of the two religions.

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### Formal Interviews

F1: She, Pi-Chen and Shan Wang. Personal Interview with Amanda Comstock. 2 February 2004.

F2: Ho, Gary (CEO Tzu Chi Canada). Personal Interview with Ming Chung and Bradley Hall. 14 March 2004.

F3: She, Pi-Chen. Personal Interview with Ming Chung, Amanda Comstock and Bradley Hall. March 19th, 2004.

### Informal Conversations

I1: Mrs. Kuo, February 27th.

I2: Pi-Chen She February 27th

I3: Tina Chaw, February 24th

I4: Gean Pwu , February 24th

I5: Director of *Mission Bon Accueil*, Men's division, February 24th