

The Origins of Tzu Chi

TZU CHI FOUNDATION



In 1944, when Master Cheng Yen was seven years old, Taiwan was still under Japanese occupation. Like all people in Taiwan, she constantly hid in bomb shelters from American air raids. She noticed people around her praying to the Goddess of Mercy to throw the bombs into the sea. From this, she became aware of the Goddess's compassion. After Japan was defeated, she looked after her sick brother in a hospital for eight months. There she was able to experience people's pain and helplessness when facing birth, illness, aging and death. She also began to admire the spirit of doctors and nurses in saving the patients.

Her father's unexpected death from a brain hemorrhage made her realize the impermanence of life. From that point on, the Master became very interested in the study of Buddhism. Most monks and nuns at that time, however, were always occupied with various religious services, and Buddhist teachings were not promoted. Nonetheless, the decision to work for Buddhism was firmly planted in her mind. She chose to be self-reliant during her moral cultivation, without accepting any offerings from followers. She further felt that spiritual formation was not something to be done in isolation, but had to be put into concrete practice in order to benefit all human beings.

In 1961, Master Cheng Yen left home and wandered throughout Eastern Taiwan with a friendly nun, Master Hsiu Tao. She saw the misery of poor people in that area, and she vowed to help them. She settled down in Hualien, studied Buddhism by herself and adhered faithfully to the admonition of her mentor, Master Yin Shun: "You must constantly be committed to Buddhism and all living beings."

Master Cheng Yen recalled that once she and Master Hsiu Tao were riding their bicycles on the paths among the rice fields at dusk. The road gradually became narrower and narrower, until it finally ended altogether. Master Hsiu Tao suggested that they turn around and go back. Master Cheng Yen said that she would rather carry the bicycle and continue on foot than turn back. It was with this kind of determination and courage that she was later able to found Tzu Chi and spread its good works round the whole planet.

At a clinic in Fenglin, the Master saw a pool of blood left by a poor woman who could not afford the clinic's registration fees. The shock of seeing the blood was the catalyst for establishing the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation at Pu Ming Temple in 1966. The first members were 30 housewives who donated from their grocery money. Before going to the markets every day, these housewives each put NT\$0.50 [US\$0.01] into a bamboo "piggy bank." One of the housewives suggested that it would be more convenient to deposit a lump sum of NT\$15 [US\$0.38] a month. The Master replied that when they deposited 50 cents a day, they could have compassionate thoughts every day, whereas if they made a deposit once a month, they would have only one compassionate thought every 30 days. Those housewives brought Tzu Chi's spirit to the markets, so that the news that "fifty cents can also help people" spread throughout Hualien.

Tzu Chi members did this-worldly work with an other-worldly spirit. Making an extra pair of baby shoes each day, the Master's followers in those early days stitched out the model of the future foundation. Although their lives were unsettled and full of disturbances, they considered their jobs a training ground for 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 — Masters 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. Their residence, the Abode of Still Thoughts, thus became the true spiritual home for all Tzu Chi members.

The current appearance of the Abode is the result of nine expansions. Other than some financial support from the Master's mother, Mrs. Wang Yue-kuei, the purchase of the land and the construction of the buildings were entirely paid for by the hard work of the nuns themselves. Through the changes in the Abode, we can see the historical tracks of Tzu Chi's development.

Beginning

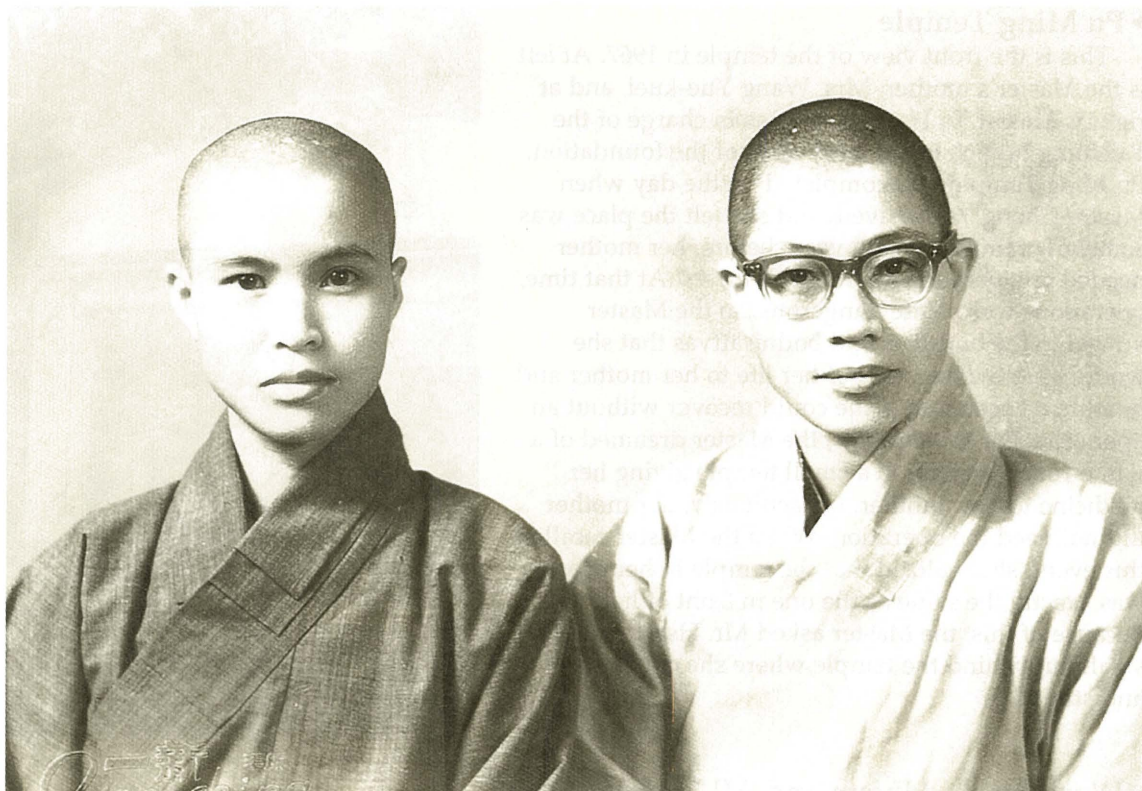
Thirty years ago, Taiwan was a poor society and Buddhism was not promoted. With the sudden death of her father, Master Cheng Yen decided to leave home and travel around the eastern part of Taiwan with Master Hsiu Tao.

► Where Is Father?

Master Cheng Yen's father was very strong and healthy, but one day in June 1960, he suddenly had a stroke. A doctor was asked to treat him, after which the Master had her father taken home. In less than one day's time, he passed away. His sudden death was due to the fact that the doctor had forgotten to tell her not to move her father. This was a major blow to the Master.

On the evening of the funeral, there was a thunderstorm. Although the Master loved her father very much, she could not accompany him to his grave that night. She realized from this experience that a life only lasts for the duration of one breath: when there is no breath, there is no life. This spurred the Master to enter the world of Buddhism, and she eventually left home and founded Tzu Chi.





▲ Master Hsiu Tao

Master Hsiu Tao (right) was the abbess of the Tzu Yun Temple in Fengyuan. She was also Master Cheng Yen's first instructor, responsible for guiding her into Buddhism. After the Master's stepfather passed away, she often came to the temple to question Master Hsiu Tao about Buddhist dogma. Master Hsiu Tao had gone to school in Japan and she zealously desired to promote Buddhism.

One day in the early autumn of 1961, while the two women were walking among farm fields, Master Hsiu Tao asked Master Cheng Yen whether she wanted to be a nun. Master Cheng Yen affirmed that she did indeed desire to enter religious life. They wandered from Taichung to Kaohsiung and then to Taitung, a nun and a layperson traveling from place to place like flowing water. They finally settled down in Luyeh, near Taitung on the east coast of Taiwan. That same winter, they went to Tung Ching Temple in Hualien, where they met old Hsu Tsung-ming, a devout Buddhist layman who had thoroughly studied Buddhist teachings. In the winter of 1962, the Master asked Mr. Hsu to be her teacher. He gave her the religious name, "Hsiu Tsan," and she shaved her own head (a very untraditional act) to show that she had become a novice. Master Hsiu Tao was forced by poor health to return to Fengyuan.

► Pu Ming Temple

This is the front view of the temple in 1967. At left is the Master's mother, Mrs. Wang Yue-kuei, and at right is Master Ta Hung, who was in charge of the Taichung branch in the early days of the foundation. Pu Ming Temple was completed on the day when Master Cheng Yen arrived, and she felt the place was somehow familiar. Many years before, her mother needed an operation for stomach ulcers. At that time, operations were quite dangerous, so the Master vowed to the buddhas and bodhisattvas that she would give twelve years of her life to her mother and become a vegetarian if she could recover without an operation. For three nights, the Master dreamed of a white-robed woman in a small temple giving her medicine for her mother. Miraculously, her mother did not need the operation. When the Master recalled this event, she realized that the temple in her dream was exactly the same as the one in front of her. Because of this, the Master asked Mr. Hsu to build a small hut behind the temple where she could stay and study.



▼ Work for Buddhism and All Living Beings

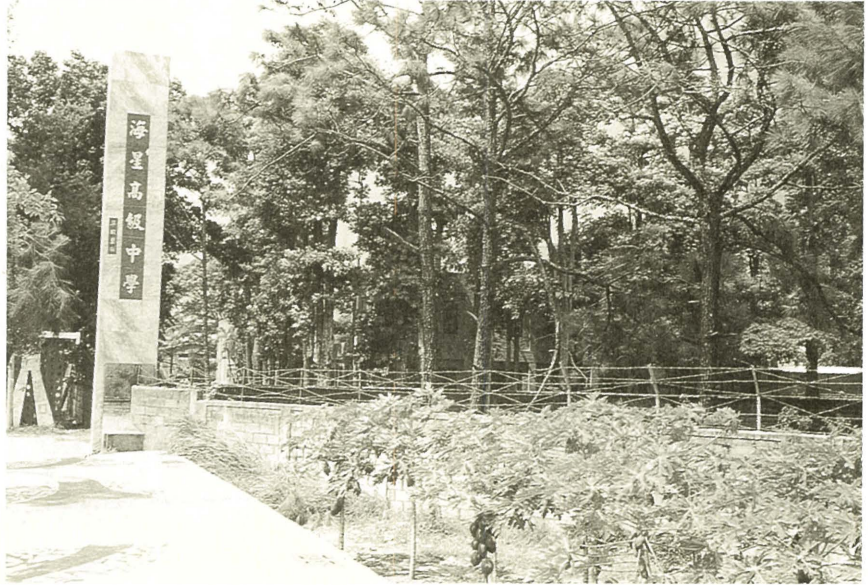
In February 1963, the Master went to Lin Chi Temple in Taipei to receive the precepts and officially become a nun. Because she had shaved her head herself, rather than being shaved by a Buddhist monk, she was rejected. She went to Hui Jih Lecture Hall, intending to purchase the complete volume of *The Speeches of Master Tai Hsu* and then return to Hualien. In the lecture hall, she happened to run into the famous Master Yin Shun. She was suddenly inspired to ask



him to accept her as his disciple, and he kindly consented. She was given the religious name "Cheng Yen." He instructed her to "work for Buddhism and for all living beings," an admonition that the Master continues to carry out even today. The photo here was taken in 1969, when Master Yin Shun, on his way to take up the position of preceptor at Hai Hui Temple, came to Hualien and stayed for a while.

► Dogma Debate

Not long after the Master returned from Fenglin, three Catholic nuns from Hai Hsing High School came to see her. They talked about religion, life, and their religious beliefs. The nuns admitted that Buddhism promoted love for all beings and that its teachings were more profoundly complex than those of Catholicism. However, the



nuns pointed out that Catholics had built hospitals, schools and churches in remote areas to assist the poor. "What has Buddhism done?" they asked. The Master could not respond. This debate only strengthened her determination to help the poor and the needy. The three nuns can no longer be found, but this photo shows Hai Hsing High School.

▼ Tzu Chi's First Anniversary

The 24th of the third month of the lunar calendar in 1967 was Tzu Chi's first anniversary. There were only 10 commissioners, but total membership had reached more than 300. In its first year, the foundation collected US\$719, and 15 families – or 31 people – received assistance. The photo shows the Master and her disciples in front of Pu Ming Temple in commem-



oration of Tzu Chi's first anniversary. In the front row from left are: Mrs. Ping Hui-yung (who helped the Master in her studies at Pu Ming Temple), Master Te Tzu, Master Cheng Yen, Master Te Chao, and Commissioner Chuang Shih. In the back row from left are Master Te En and Master Te Jung, who were not nuns yet, and other people affiliated with Tzu Chi.



TZU CHI FOUNDATION

▲ The Glove Factory

In the fall of 1964, the Master brought her disciples back to Pu Ming Temple, and they studied together behind the main hall. They did not give sermons or hold religious services, nor did they go out to beg for food. They relied totally on their own efforts: they took in raw materials from factories and wove them into sweaters, and they also planted vegetables and collected wild plants to sustain themselves. After the establishment of the Tzu Chi Foundation, they also wove cotton gloves in their spare time to provide supplementary income for the foundation. The simple hut in the picture is the glove factory.

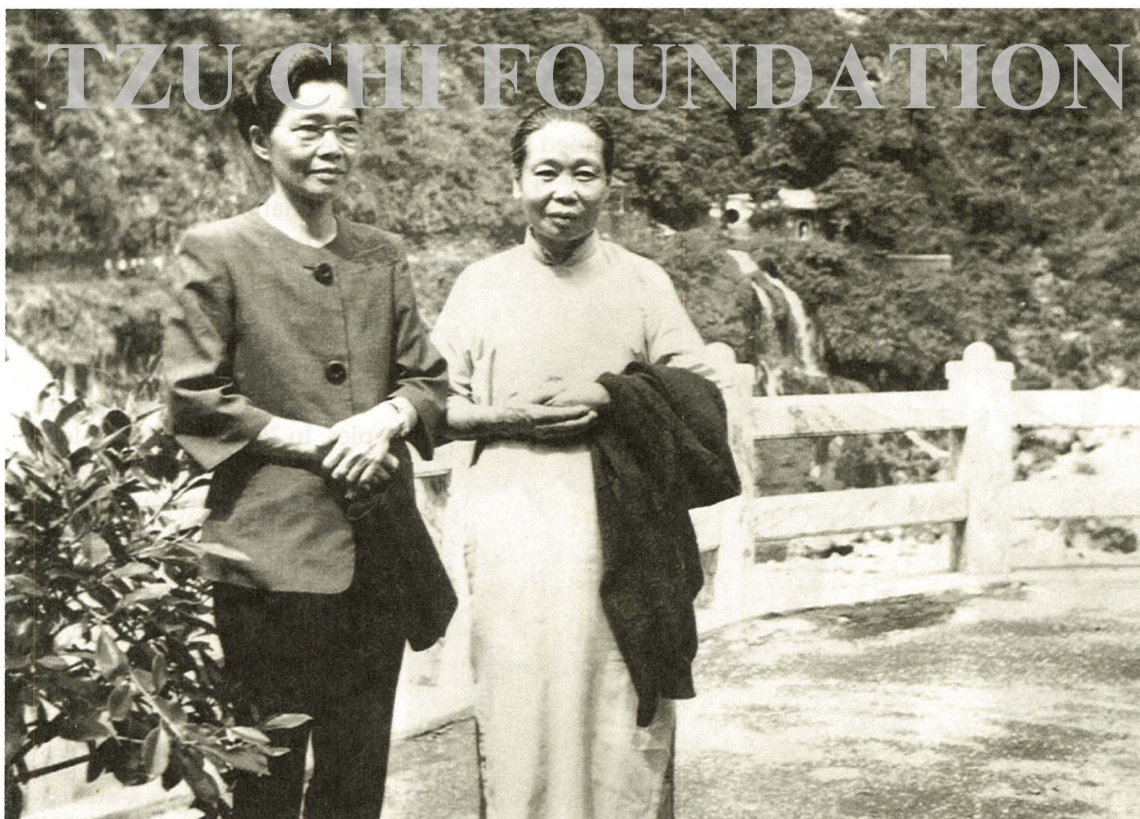
The Nuns and Their Supporters

The nuns at the Abode of Still Thoughts supported Master Cheng Yen in carrying out the Tzu Chi missions. These people were simple, sincere and humble, like ripe rice plants that bow their heads. Day after day, they tempered their radiant personalities through their work.

▼The Master's Mother and Mrs. Chuang Shih

Two women who assisted Master Cheng Yen in the early days were her mother, Mrs. Wang Yue-kuei (left) and Commissioner Chuang Shih (right). When the Master left home to become a nun, Mrs. Wang felt bad that the Master did not take any money with her, so she decided to assist the Master as though she were marrying her off. Mrs. Wang donated money for the land for the Abode, for the construction of the buildings and for the raw materials to make cotton gloves.

Mrs. Chuang Shih's son had a transport company, so the family was quite well-off and Mrs. Chuang could stay home and enjoy her life. After she became acquainted with the Master at the Tzu Shan Temple, she decided to follow her. Several months later, she followed the Master to Pu Ming Temple and assisted her in any way she could. When Tzu Chi was established, she was the first to encourage others to follow the Master, and she even helped the masters make baby shoes. She passed away at the age of 87 in 1982.



► Mrs. Hsu's Care

The Master is here pictured with Mrs. Hsu, the wife of Hsu Tsung-ming, in 1969, when the Abode of Still Thoughts had just been completed. The Hsus often looked after the Master. In the winter of 1961, when the Master had just arrived in Hualien, she received much assistance from them. Later, Mr. Hsu built Hsiang Te Temple in Tienhsiang, hoping the Master would go there to take charge. She did not go because she did not feel that her vocation was in temples, so the Hsus were quite disappointed. However, the Master repaid their kindness by establishing Tzu Chi and carrying out charity work. The Hsus were delighted about that and dedicated themselves to Tzu Chi.



▼ Visiting Mrs. Chuang

When the Master lectured on the *Earth Treasury (Ksitigarbha*) Sutra* at Tzu Shan Temple, she was only 27 or 28 years old, yet she comprehended the philosophy very well. Her lectures were very interesting and she had a graceful, dignified appearance. So many people attended her lectures that no seats were vacant. Masters Te Tzu, Te Jung and Te En became acquainted with the Master through these lectures. Other laypersons also asked the Master to accept them as disciples. In 1964, the Master left Tzu Shan Temple and spent the summer studying at Hai Hui Temple. This photo was taken when the Master led Masters Te Tzu, Te Jung and Te En to visit Mrs. Chuang at her home before they left Hualien.



* *Ksitigarbha* is often translated as "Earth Treasury" in Chinese. This bodhisattva is quite famous for two vows: to attain buddhahood only when all suffering souls are saved from hell, and to be enlightened only when all living beings are redeemed from the misery of the world.



◀ Master Te Chao Is Frugal

Master Te Chao (front) was two years older than Master Cheng Yen. She followed the Master since before Tzu Chi was established. She was frugal and diligent. She used to attach pieces of tire rubber to the bottom of her clogs so that she wouldn't make any noise when she walked and so that the clogs would not wear out so quickly. She recalls that when they were living at the Ti Tsang Temple, there were only two tatamis for four to five people, so they had to sleep on their sides and could not turn. They all had to huddle under only two comforters. There were also mice running around, and sometimes the mice would bite their toes. During that difficult period, no cooking oil was available. All they ate was rice with soy sauce, but they were content.

▶ Between the Master and Her Disciple

Master Te Tzu (left) was three years older than Master Cheng Yen. When she was young, she decided to become a nun, but she did not want to go against her mother's will and leave her family before her brother did. When her brother was married, she finally shaved her head. At that time, she was already 28. She did not have any Buddhist teacher, so when she heard Master Cheng Yen's lectures at Tzu Shan Temple, she decided to follow her. With the Master's instructions, approachable Master Te Tzu was able to lead everyone else with "sincerity, integrity, trust and honesty," and thus won the respect of all.



► Three Masters Take the Precepts

In 1970, Masters Te En, Te Yang and Te Jung (from left) went to Lin Chi Temple together to take the precepts to formally become nuns.

Master Te En used to go with old Mrs. Chuang's granddaughter to Tzu Shan Temple, and it was there that she met Master Cheng Yen. She was responsible for the charity mission and was well acquainted with the needy families around the province. She was an especially good cook.

Master Te Yang was very good at sewing, so all Master Cheng Yen's clothes were made by her hands. In order to supplement the income for the Abode, she used to sew women's garments at the Abode.

Master Te Jung moved into Pu Ming Temple on Chinese New Year's Eve in 1964 and began her charity work. She had a majestic appearance and used to be the Master's personal attendant. She had a good memory and a strong sense of responsibility. She used a thin comforter so that she would stay alert; when the Master woke up, she too would get up to serve her.



▼ Excursion

Although life at the Abode was very hard, everyone embraced the conviction to "work willingly and accept the results happily." They were busy, but their life was fulfilling. Beginning in 1964, Master Cheng Yen lectured in the evenings on the *Four Books*, *Lotus Sutra* and *Lament by a Liang Dynasty Emperor*. She taught a text one day and expected the nuns to recite the same text from memory the next day. So after the lectures, everyone strolled under the weak street lights, murmuring the texts. Everyone remembers very well that time of farming during the day and studying at night. Sometimes the study was interrupted during busy farming seasons. When



Tzu Chi was established in 1966, the study had to be stopped altogether because of the busy schedule. This photo was taken when Master Cheng Yen's mother came to visit from Taichung during the off-season, and the whole group went for an excursion to Tienhsiang and Taroko Gorge. From left: Ching Chih's mother, Master Te En, Ching Tzu, Mrs. Chuang, Master Te Jung, Mrs. Wang (the Master's mother), Chen-jung, Master Cheng Yen, Master Te Tzu.



▲ Sharing the Missions

With the development of the Tzu Chi missions in the last five or six years, more people can understand the true essence of Buddhism. Many of them have decided to live at the Abode and carry out the Path of the Bodhisattvas. Those waiting to be nuns are also on the rise. This photograph of Master Yin Shun and 15 newly-consecrated nuns was taken on November 11, 1995, when Master Yin Shun came to stay for a short while.

TZU CHI FOUNDATION

No Work, No Meal

For 30 years, the Master and her disciples have abided by the principle of self-reliance. They farm and do handiwork to sustain their simple daily life to realize Zen Master Pai Chang's spirit of "No work, no meal."

▼ Farming

Master Te Tzu and Sister Ching Chih inspect the rice fields after the Chinese New Year in 1967.

When Tzu Chi was just founded, Master Cheng Yen's mother, Mrs. Wang Yue-kuei, helped finance the purchase of 1.46 acres of land for the Abode of Still Thoughts. The rest was paid for with a bank loan. In order to pay back the mortgage, the masters learned to plant rice. They did not hire anyone to help. Fertilizing, weeding, harvesting and drying — they did everything themselves. They did not have any experience in farming at first, so sometimes the rice plants withered from too much fertilizer. Sometimes when the plants were harvested, there were only empty shells and no rice. The masters wasted a lot of energy, time and money, and were still in debt for more than US\$250. The masters continued to plant diligently and also acquired much more experience.





◀ Cotton Gloves

Masters Te En and Te Jung (with her back to the camera) show the lighter side of the hard work in a work-room at Pu Ming Temple in the summer of 1968.

Because of the low output of rice and the years of bad harvests, the masters turned to making cotton gloves. The hand-turned weaving machine at the right in this photo was purchased by Mrs. Wang, Master Cheng Yen's mother. This work began in 1967 and continued until 1972, when they could no longer purchase raw cotton due to the rise in prices for consumer goods.

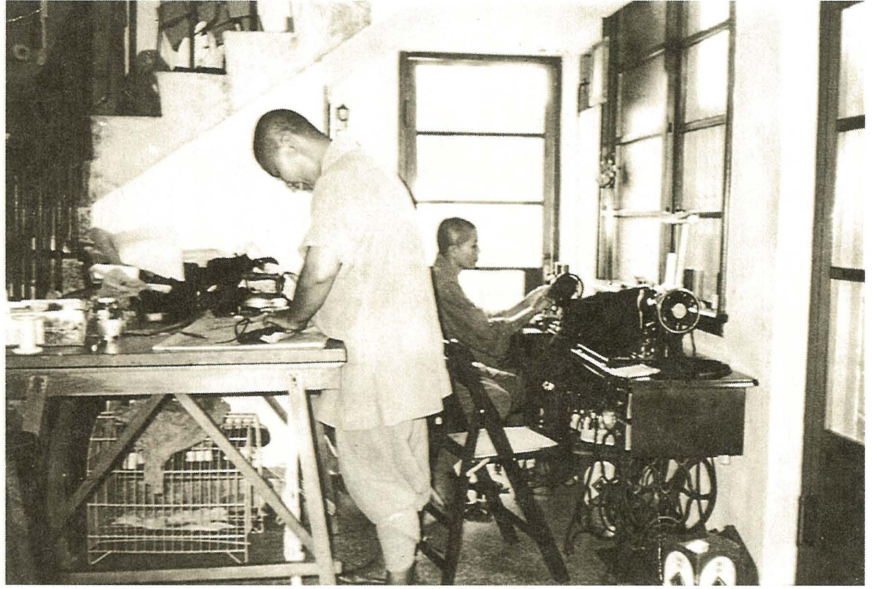


▲ Ultrasonic Diaper Machine

Diaper-making started in October 1980 and continued until 1985. Cheng Po, manager of a papaya plantation, sent over a machine, and a factory in Taipei was contracted to deliver the raw materials for making diapers. One box of twelve general-grade diapers earned US\$0.24, and a box of twelve high-grade diapers earned US\$0.45. Once the machine was turned on, the temperature of the machine could rise to 1,832 degrees Fahrenheit, so injuries happened quite often. At the same time, the foundation was also soliciting funds to build the Tzu Chi Hospital and many people went to visit the Abode. Thus, the expenditures at the Abode went up and the masters had to work overtime.

► Making Circuit Breakers

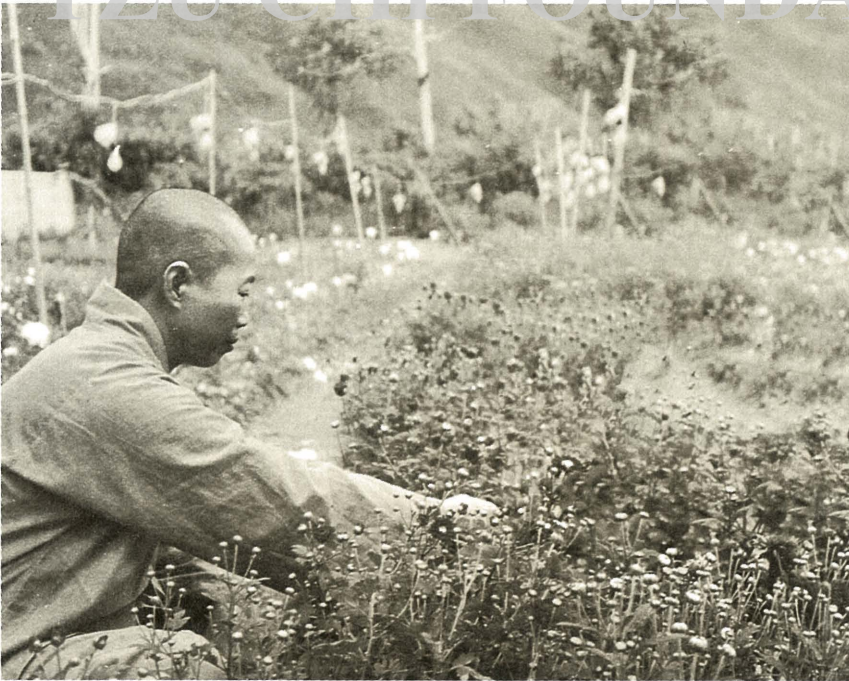
Nuns make electrical circuit breakers in 1975. They used a shuttle from a weaving machine to produce circular bronze coils. The income was very high, about US\$125-150, but the sparks from the welding were dangerous to the eyes. In fact, Master Te Jung and Sister Ching Sung both had hemorrhages in their eyes due to the sparks.



Therefore, they only made safety breakers for a year. In this photo, Master Te Jung sits in front of a sewing machine, while Master Te Yang, standing, tailors garments.

▼ Planting Chrysanthemums

The masters also tried planting chrysanthemums on a piece of land to the right of the Abode. They planted the seeds in September and could harvest them at the Chinese New Year in February of the following year. The flowers relied on sunlight during the daytime, so the masters used light bulbs in the evening to speed their growth. The masters received more than



US\$200 per year from selling the flowers, quite a large sum for the Abode at that time. When it came to selling these flowers, the commissioners or Sister Ching Yi's daughter, Fang Ming-chu, helped out by driving the flowers to the city and selling them there. The masters often thought that asking others to sell the flowers would increase other people's burden, so they only planted them for three years, from 1983 to 1985.



TZU CHI FOUNDATION

◀ Pottery

In 1987, the masters tried another type of work — making pottery. At the start, a Professor Wu came to teach them. Master Te Tzu was very artistic, so she mastered the craft very quickly. That year was the first anniversary of the Tzu Chi General Hospital, so in one month the Abode produced 3,000 busts of the Great Compassion Bodhisattva for visitors. In 1991, the Tzu Chi headquarters were computerized and there was a great demand for electricity, so the pottery work stopped.

◀ Plastic Flowers

In 1985, other than the monthly commissioners' meeting and the Medicine Buddha service, there were not many visitors to the Abode. The masters' lives were still hard. In order to provide gifts to welcome anyone visiting the Abode, the masters made plastic flowers. One bunch cost only a little more than US\$2.50. However, at the day's end, their hands were very sore and stiff, so this project was short-lived.



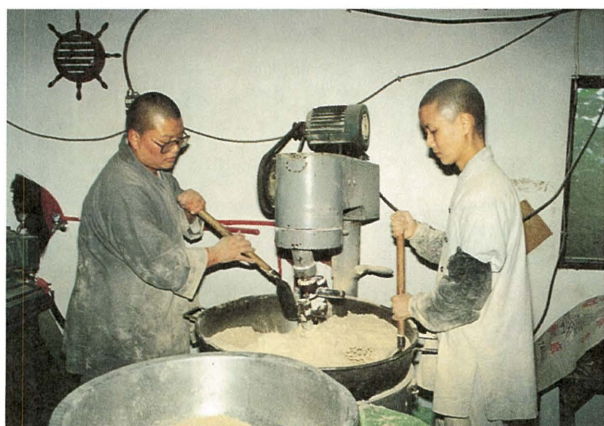
▲ Harvesting Peanuts

The masters started planting peanuts behind Pu Ming Temple in 1965. Because the soil was quite poor, it was suggested to Master Cheng Yen that they plant watermelons, which had a much higher economic value. However, the Master felt that rice and yams were sufficient as food and oil could be extracted from peanuts. All three of these plants were necessary for sustaining the masters' livelihood, so the land was mostly planted with these crops. In 1989, a piece of land in front of the Abode was planted with peanuts. When there was a harvest, the peanut field became a great classroom to study nature. Children were very happy to join the masters in harvesting the peanuts.



▲ Making Pearl-Barley Bean Powder

This powder was invented by a nutritionist in Kaohsiung. He puffed almonds, black beans, pearl barley, lotus seeds, soybeans and other beans. Then he ground them into powder and mixed it with water for a tasty, nutritious drink. He packaged the powder and sold it through Tzu Chi branches. Demand rose, and the powder went into large-scale production. The whole process – picking, washing, drying, frying and grinding the beans – was done by the Abode members. At the early stage, a second-hand puffed-rice machine was used to puff the beans, so there were frequent accidents. Now machines are used to puff the beans and mix the powder, so the quality is much better.



◀ In this 1990 photo, an older machine was used to mix the powder, so the two masters had powder all over them.



▲ Candles Without Tears

The candles made at the Abode do not drip wax, so they are called “candles without tears.” In the past, Abode members used small plastic beverage bottles as molds. Due to the large production, they first had to go out and collect empty bottles from garbage dumps and then bring them back and wash them. They also had to endure the revolting odor as they picked through the garbage. When the wax was melted, they added color to it, poured it into the bottles, and immediately inserted the wicks. When the wax had cooled, they cut open the bottles. Now we can only imagine the process in those days by looking at the picture above.

► Masters at the Abode work on the new candle-making machine. The masters pour melted wax into the molds. When the wax has cooled, they then remove the excess wax from the surface, push a button, and the rows of candles are pushed up to the surface.



A Spiritual Home

When the Master first arrived in Hualien, she had no place to stay. With the help of her mother and the tiny income from the work of the nuns, the Abode of Still Thoughts was built. Now, the Abode is the spiritual home of millions of Tzu Chi members.



▲ A Lonely Building

After Tzu Chi was established, more and more people came to visit and more families received assistance from the foundation, so Pu Ming Temple became overcrowded. With the help of Master Cheng Yen's mother, the current site of 1.46 acres of land was purchased. In the spring of 1968, Mrs. Wang donated another US\$5,000 to construct the Abode. The plans, based on Master Cheng Yen's own ideas, were drawn up by architect Huang Yen-yen. The area of the building, including the verandas, was only 261 square feet. During construction, there were no people living nearby, so the Abode was quite lonely. Certainly, no one expected that it would become the spiritual home for millions of Tzu Chi members.



▲ Outdoor Feast

During the annual distribution to the poor on January 26, 1973, needy families enjoy a meal provided by Tzu Chi. Due to lack of space in the hall, the meal was held outdoors. Behind the fountain built by the masters is a machinery room to the right and the main hall to the left.



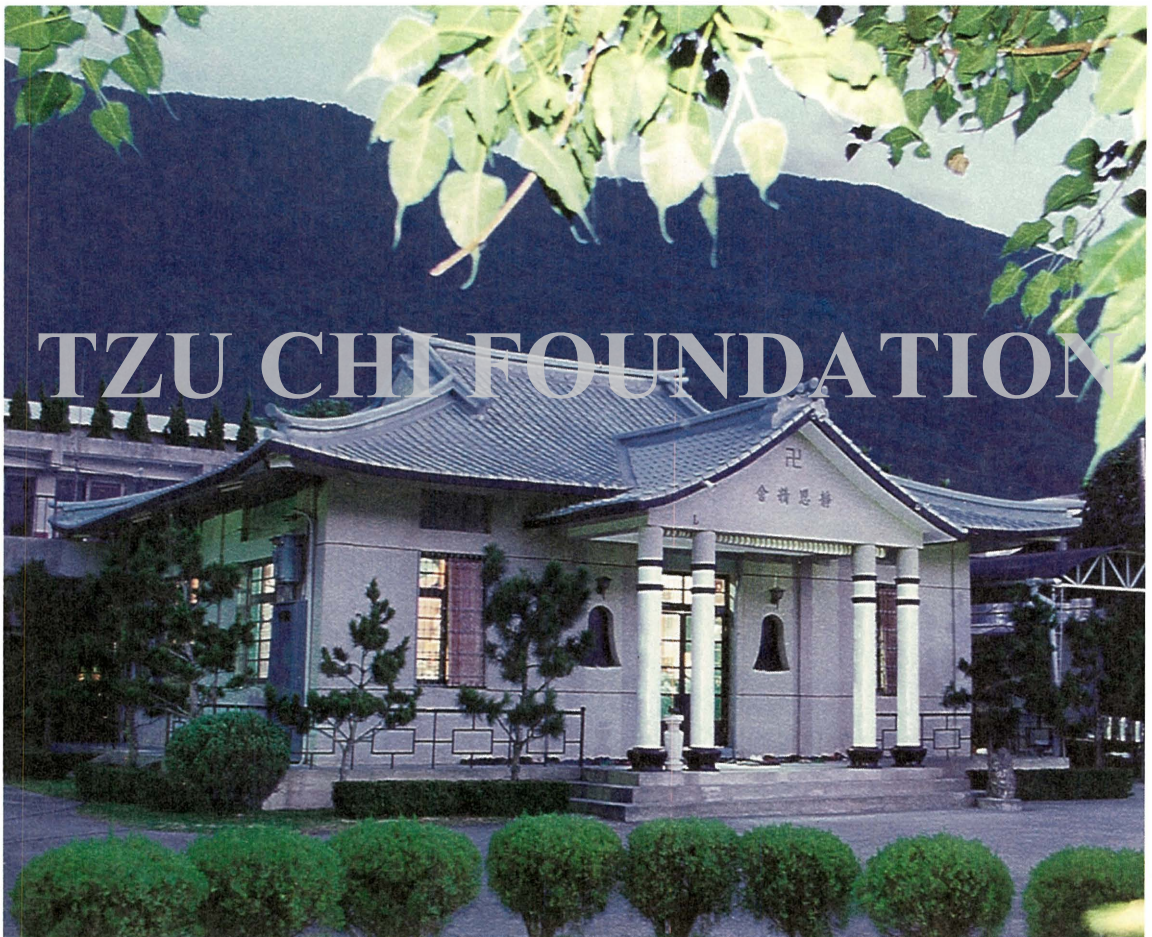
▲ False Alarm

Construction on the Abode started in the spring of 1968, and it was completed one year later. The opening of the Abode, when this picture was taken, was celebrated with the Seven-Day Amitabha Buddha Retreat. In front of the main hall was the masters' farm field, with rice plants waving in the wind. No one lived nearby. Once a group of drunk aborigines came knocking at the door at midnight. It was fortunate that they left after being asked politely to do so. Three nights later, there came another tapping on the door. When the masters asked who was there, there was no reply. Master Te Tzu finally climbed up and looked down through the small window above the door. She saw the dog, Shan-ting, looking up at her, and she burst out laughing. For safety, the front door and all windows were later fitted with iron bars.



◀ Good-Bye to the Past

In 1991, the Abode was planning its eighth expansion, including the male and the female dormitories. Therefore, the temporary kitchen, the workroom for the pearl-barley bean powder, and other rooms were demolished. Here, nuns and followers remove nails from boards, which will be used as excellent fuel for cooking.



▲ Spiritual Home

The little Abode of Still Thoughts (here during a morning service in 1988) is not only the spiritual home for millions of Tzu Chi members, but the number of resident nuns is also rising. By October 1996, there were 71 nuns.