

Environment Protection in Post-Earthquake Sichuan Schools

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
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The foundation is building 13 schools in the area of Sichuan devastated by an earthquake two years ago and introducing into them some of its core ideas – a ban on smoking and protection of the environment.

Measuring 7.9 on the Richter scale, the Wenchuan quake struck on the afternoon of May 12, 2008; it killed 68,000 people, injured 374,000 and left nearly five million people homeless. The government estimated that over 7,000 poorly built school rooms collapsed. The foundation undertook to rebuild 13 schools, as part of its 'Project Hope' program.

Two years on from the disaster, it has completed two of them -- a kindergarten and elementary school on the same campus in the town of Luoshui. On March 1, the students and faculty celebrated the opening of the elementary school at a ceremony full of joy and excitement. "I am very happy for the help Tzu Chi people have given our school," said Wang Guofa, a senior teacher. "In my 30 years of teaching here, we have never had such a fine campus. Since the disaster, our campus has become much more beautiful and the air is fresher."

One reason for the cleaner air is that the school has decided to adopt one of Tzu Chi's ten precepts – no smoking. It is one of the few schools in all of China to enforce such a ban. "Now, in our school, you only smell books and flowers," said principal Quan Shaoqiang. "You hear the sound of teachers at work and the babbling of eager students." The re-opening of the school has also been the occasion for a review of its work, for the first time. Experienced teachers conduct the review, with the younger teachers and extra-curricular instructors listening keenly, eager to improve their work. "This is of benefit for everyone," said Quan. "We teachers wholeheartedly applaud this. After learning this, our students have changed. Everyone has changed for the better." The excitement of the opening was mixed with the arrival of spring and the sound of children everywhere; nature continues its cycle and the memory of the earthquake is fading, as peace returns to people's lives.



The foundation is also building the Luoshui Middle School, the largest of its 13 education projects in the earthquake zone. This is because two schools were merged into one; this means large dormitories, a big cafeteria, auditorium and athletics field. The architects decided that giving the students enough space was a priority, to guarantee them a comfortable, open and spacious plan to learn. 'Plain and simple' is the ideal of Tzu Chi architecture; this shows in every corner of the campus, including the introduction of a stream of clear water running through it.

Luoshui middle school has been chosen as the most exemplary of all of Sichuan's post-quake school reconstructions. "The stream has been diverted to run through the school," said Lu

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Xiaofan, Capital Museum. "Here we have both mountains and water. When our students from Beijing saw the campus, they were envious. The front hall of the school has been built on a curve; the structure is very good. At the back, the architects have paid attention to the studying needs of the pupils."

The school is next door to the Tzu Chi Activity Center, which has co-operated with the school to encourage protection of the environment. Each class has chosen one student to be a 'recycling monitor'. Volunteers often lead the children in conservation activities, so that the area around the school has become known as the 'Luoshi conservation town'. They have taught the concepts of conservation to students in the temporary classrooms they are using before the completion of the new school. As a result, the entire school is actively recycling; every class has up to four students on recycling duty, to keep the campus beautiful. School principal Xu Kaiqian said that, as the first step, students had begun recycling and sorting waste. "Next, we want to lead them into the community and influence the whole town to join us in recycling and be among the leaders in China."

Student Hua Ningjie said that there were four categories of recyclables, including aluminum cans, paper and plastic bottles. "The paper should be folded neatly." Student Luo Qin said that he supported recycling: "we can make our environment a little better." One strong supporter of the program is teacher Jiang Zhijun, who personally bought books for his students after the earthquake, to ensure that their studies were not interrupted. "I hope that my students learn to care for the planet through the recycling program. We want to implement it in our own lives, on campus, by promoting recycling. We are learning how people can live in a sustainable way, with a good relationship to nature. Some of the snacks which the students buy are hard to recycle: they contain a lot of oil, pepper and noodles." The volunteers are keen to take the students to visit homes in the town and teach the community about recycling. This is unusual in China.

Sifting through waste is dirty and hard work: its deeper meaning lies for those it brings together, building bonds of love between them and the earth, each nurturing the other.