



On Sunday May 7, 2023 at Oyster Bay High School in New York, Tzu Chi Academy of Long Island's faculty, volunteers, and of course, students and parents gathered together to celebrate Mother's Day.

Preparations for the event began as early as several months prior, following the school's Chinese New Year event in January. The morning hours before the event itself were a hectic rush of volunteers, students, and teachers setting up the school's gymnasium and conducting last-minute rehearsals. The gymnasium was set up with rows of chairs, with each of the 46 chairs having a basin in front of it. This was to prepare for the highlight of the event: the foot bathing ceremony, wherein students would gently and respectfully kneel before their mothers and bathe their feet, expressing their filial piety in a manner which is likely foreign to most Westerners, but which is an integral part of Chinese tradition and culture. It was the academy's first time ever attempting the ceremony on such a large scale.

Tom Vasak, a student in the adult Chinese class who is not of Chinese heritage and said he'd never seen anything quite like it before, said this regarding what students participating in and watching the foot bathing ceremony might gain from it: "Maybe for the younger kids, [it might teach them] reverence for mothers... I don't know. It's all very foreign to me, but it could also set a tone of 'she's my mom, let me help take care of her.'"

The Mother's Day celebration itself officially began at 11:00AM. The celebration featured a speech from Principal Richard Chuang, followed by the foot bathing ceremony. After the ceremony came a number of performances: a recitation of three poems—"Traveler's Song", "Mama is a Tall Tree", and "Mother is a Tall Mountain"--by groups of students ranging from second to tenth grade; an interactive dance to the song "Mama's Baby" by the pre-pre-K class, the school's youngest class with students ranging from 2-4 years old; a sign language performance to the song "A Picture of a Kneeling Lamb" by some Tzu Shao (Tzu Chi Foundation's youth group for high school students); another sign language performance to the song "Very Sweet" from the adult Chinese class, many students of which are parents of students who want to learn Chinese alongside their children; and finally, a dance performed by the school's male volunteers and the male members of the adult Chinese class to the song "Love You!".



Regarding the Tzu Shao's sign language performance to "A Picture of a Kneeling Lamb", longtime teacher at the academy and career music teacher Liang-Kuan Shen said that song in particular never fails to leave her feeling emotional. "I love that song and every time I hear it, it almost makes me cry; the lyrics are so touching." The song's lyrics center around the image of a lamb kneeling before its mother to drink her milk as a metaphor for how we should honor our parents and mothers in particular.

The event's purpose was in part to entertain and honor mothers as part of Mother's Day, but the foot bathing ceremony in particular is the key to understanding the true meaning of the event: the expression of filial piety. Simply put, filial piety is the virtue of honoring and respecting one's parents and elders, as well as holding a sense of responsibility towards them. As one of Confucius' central teachings, it is a core tenet of Chinese society and culture. The emphasis on filial piety in Chinese culture is reflected by a thought-provoking quote from Yan-Ping Gong, a Tzu Chi commissioner for many years, who said, "When you drink water, it has a source. You have to know where the water comes from, and be thankful for it." This is why filial piety is part of the humanistic culture educational curriculum of not just the Tzu Chi Academy of Long Island, but of Tzu Chi Academies everywhere. Filial piety and the other virtues and behaviors taught at Tzu Chi Academies are part of what makes them distinct from other Chinese schools. At Tzu Chi Academy, you don't just learn how to read, write, speak, and listen to Chinese; you also learn about how to be a good person and a good member of society.

As Principal Chuang said regarding the meaning of the event as a whole within the grander scheme of things, "Master Cheng Yen [the Buddhist nun who founded Tzu Chi Foundation] always insists that we must put compassion and filial piety into action, and education is a very important part of that, so we seized this opportunity to let everyone know that mothers have it rough, working every day to do various things for us. No matter what, our moms are always there for us, so we should really try to make our mothers happy, listen to what they tell us, and let every day be like Mother's Day for them." by Ariel Tsai

