***The Power of Example***

**Green Living and Transformative Activism in Hong Kong**

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***For the green people in Hong Kong***

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***Notes on romanizations, names, and translations***

This book follows the Jyutping System for Cantonese Romanisation (e.g., *luksik saangwut*). For the convenience of typesetting, I omit the tone numbers in all romanisation. In certain instances, some Chinese concepts are presented in Hanyu Pinyin (e.g., *tianren heyi*). Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

Street and place names align with government spellings, such as Central, Mong Kok, and the New Territories.

In Hong Kong, it is common for individuals to have a Chinese name and an “English name”.[[1]](#footnote-1) Within the green living circle, some adopted a “nature name” (*ji yin meng*), a name inspired by the natural world. The tradition of adopting a nature name began with the Gaia Association. In 2007, the Gaia Association established the Gaia School—the only primary school in Hong Kong that places nature education and green living at the heart of its curriculum. Both teachers and pupils at the Gaia School are encouraged to select a nature name and use it. Increasingly, green people with no direct connections with the Gaia Association also embrace this naming tradition. For a list of nature names, see Appendix 1.

To protect the identities of my interlocutors, I use pseudonyms for all names, except public figures whose stories are publicly available via the media. When necessary, I have also altered certain details of their lives and used composite characters to further ensure anonymity.

***Introduction***

It was the autumn of 2019, three months after the start of the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB) protests, I found a quiet moment to catch up YM, a staunch advocate for green and ethical living, in a traditional Hong Kong *cha chaan teng* in Mong Kok. Amidst the escalating violence, the future of Hong Kong was clouded in uncertainty. “We need to move beyond just shouting slogans. We need to live the change that we want to see (*santai likhang*).” YM stated. What he said wasn’t new to me. Long before we became acquainted in 2013, YM had been championing this message through his book, media appearances, and public talks opposing the unethical business practices of the real-estate oligarchs: “We need to think beyond the traditional ways of doing things (*lou lou*)”, YM emphasized in a Hong Kong TED talk in 2013, “Simply participating in protests and rallies might satisfy our desires to be dutiful citizens, giving us the illusion that we’ve done our part and the rest lies in the hands of the government. But this is a fallacy! We don’t need to wait for politicians to spearhead change. True transformation begins with ourselves. Our very beings and our bodies are the best instruments of change.”

While YM stands out as one of my most eloquent interlocutors of living the change (*santai likhang*), he is neither the only proponent nor the leader of this movement. When international journalists praised Hong Kong citizens for picking up and sorting rubbish for recycling amidst heated protests and mass demonstrations—a distinct tradition of Hong Kong’s protest culture—few recognized that these weren’t mere impromptu environmental acts to keep the streets clean. They are, in fact, a snippet of Hong Kong’s “green living movement”.

This book is based on a decade of ethnographic research[[2]](#footnote-2) (2012-2022) on ordinary people’s efforts to create transformative change through practising “green living” in their daily lives. In Hong Kong, the Cantonese phrase *luksik saangwut* is a blanket term used by individuals, environmental organizations, and the government to describe a way of living that is kind to the Earth and good to the people. Within the green living circle, my interlocutors liked to refer to each other as “green friends” (*luksik pangyau*) or “friends of environmental protection” (*waanbou ge pangyau*). However, in this book, I have chosen to use the term “green people” to depict individuals who tirelessly promote and practise green living by walking the talk.

Green living encompasses a wide range of practices, including zero waste living, off-grid living, recycling, upcycling, organic farming, permaculture, veganism, ecological and heritage conservation, animal rights activism, ethical consumption, anti-consumption, anti-corporations, fair trade, freecycling, freeganism, DIY, cycling, nature-watching, day hiking, alternative therapies, meditation, spiritual cultivation. The scope is vast, and criteria for what is considered “green” are ever-evolving. Yet, green living is not just a collection of eco-friendly practices. It’s an ethos, a way of life, and an ethics of care that inform an embodied and transformative politics. Such transformative activism empowers ordinary people to navigate the challenges of environmental and social sustainability, well-being, and relationality in the Anthropocene. In the local context, it raises questions like: how do we live harmoniously with nature in a concrete jungle like Hong Kong? Should we choose imported organic food over non-organic local food? Should we sacrifice the natural landscapes for the much-needed housing development? Does Hong Kong need its own agriculture?

At first glance, green living in Hong Kong bears some striking resemblances to sustainable lifestyles found in North America, Europe, and Australia. No doubt, the surge of environmental interests in Hong Kong aligns with the global trend, but it is by no means a “Western invention” imported directly from the “West” to the “East” (Weller 2006; Choy 2011; Hathaway 2013). As Michael Hathaway articulates, “These dynamics did not unfold simply as an extension of winds blowing from the West; they emerged out of unique histories and relationships among social groups, between people and nature, and between…citizens and the state” (Hathaway 2013, 14). Far from being a simple imitation of Western sustainable living, Hong Kong’s green living is a blend of both local and transnational influences from the “West” as well as neighboring countries in East and Southeast Asia. In other words, its environmentalism is simultaneously “local” and “global”. It is global not only because people in Hong Kong respond to the global appeal to combat climate change. Nor is it because Hong Kong has always been an international hub attracting global capital, ideas, and talents. It is global because Hongkongers, consciously or unconsciously, have always been involved in “making the global”, with varying intents and outcomes (Hathaway 2013). I am not just alluding to popular cultural exports like Bruce Lee movies or Cantonese Dim Sum, but also the emerging strategies we see in recent social movements, be they tactics like the “Be Water!” approach in 2019 or the diligence to collect and recycle waste during mass demonstrations in the past two decades. Through these actions, Hongkongers showcased a novel form of activism and environmentalism, providing “a masterclass to activists worldwide” (Dapiran 2017).

While green living in Hong Kong resonates with the global trend, at its core, it is deeply local. As is the case elsewhere in the world, green living is not only about protecting an abstract natural environment, but also about promoting human well-being and social welfare. In Hong Kong, the local dimension of green living is shaped by the city’s changing socio-political climate at a unique historical conjuncture. The call for revitalizing all things “local” since the early 2010s, for instance, was not only an attempt to reduce food miles and carbon footprints, but also an aspiration for autonomy, freedom, and self-sufficiency. This aspiration is intertwined with the rising sense of Hong Kong identity, mounting anti-China sentiments, and resentment towards the real-estate oligarchy. At the same time, when I began my research in 2012, many Hongkongers were growing tired of “the old ways of doing things” (*lou lou*). A notable representation of these “old ways” is the annual march on 1 July, which was described by some Hong Kong people as an annual “carnival of dissent” (Hong Kong Free Press 2022). The 1 July annual demonstration, which began in 2003, was sparked by the proposal of the national security ordinance, also known as the Basic Law Article 23—a proposed law that many Hongkongers believed would undermine their civil liberties. Fearing that Article 23 would usher in a wave of white terror in Hong Kong, nearly half a million citizens took to the streets in protest. Soon after this massive demonstration, the Hong Kong government agreed to delay the legislation of Article 23, a decision followed by the resignation of two high-ranking government officials (Lee and Chan 2008, 84). This turn of events led many to consider the 1 July demonstration in 2003 a victory of the people (Lee and Chan 2008, 94). Since then, this yearly demonstration has evolved into a multi-purpose protest advocating democratic reforms, universal suffrage, and serving as a public display for various societal grievances. For the pan-democratic factions and civil society groups, the 1 July demonstration provided them with a platform to fundraise and promote their causes to the general public.

However, a decade after its initiation, some began to feel that the annual demonstration had become more of a fleeting “moment” rather than a sustained “movement”. Once the spectacle concluded, everything went back to business as usual. This has led more and more people to look for alternative paths of action. The green living movement presented a viable means to move beyond this perceived stagnation. Unlike previous movements orchestrated by formal civil society organizations and pressure groups, which tended to take place in highly public spaces on specified days with the priority to alter the political structures, the green living movement is largely self-driven and is embedded in the practitioners’ personal and day-to-day lives. It emphasizes the selves, rather than the streets, as the main sites of social change (Haenfler, Johnson, and Jones 2012, 15; Mansbridge 2013, 1). In shifting the focus from the external to the internal and owning one’s part in the co-creation of these environmental and social issues, the green living movement set itself apart from both earlier environmental movements and more recent political protests that entrust the possibilities of changes to people and factors that are largely out of their control (Lou 2023).

The green living movement’s emphasis on individual responsibility has also shaped my methodological approach. In the past, studies on environmental activism tended to center on members of environmental NGOs, often overlooking those deeply concerned about the environment but lacking formal ties to such organizations (Ozanne, Humphrey, and Smith 1999, 613). In my own research, only a handful of my interlocutors were members of the 26 environmental organizations listed on the official website of the Environmental Protection Department (EPD) as of 2013. Most of the green people I encountered either had no affiliation with green groups or were part of groups not recognized by the EPD. This underscores the necessity to look beyond formal institutional affiliations and pay closer attention to individual actions, personal commitments, and informal organizing when exploring public engagement in environmental matters.

However, one limitation of this inclusive approach is the difficulty in estimating the size of the green living community and pinpointing the demographics of the “green people”. The challenge isn’t merely due to a lack of official data but is also intricately tied to the nature of green living itself. As I previously discussed, green living is more than adopting quantifiable eco-friendly practices. It is also about embracing a mindset and wrestling with ethical questions about how one ought to live. These elements are intangible and elusive. To draw a parallel, living a green life is akin to living a feminist life, both requiring introspection on how to align one’s life with certain ethics (Ahmed 2017, 2). Just as gauging the number of feminists at any given time or place is problematic, so too is determining the precise number of individuals dedicated to green living poses similar difficulties.

Traditionally, environmental research has categorized participants by their race, gender, and socioeconomic class—a practice especially common in environmental justice research. However, I have found such categorizations too simplistic to capture the varied activities, motivations, and backgrounds of the green people in Hong Kong. For instance, definitions of the middle class differ across countries, so applying such labels uncritically may lead to misunderstanding. Moreover, contrary to the stereotype that eco-conscious individuals in Hong Kong are predominately white middle-class people, the majority of the green people in Hong Kong are ethnic Chinese who resist the middle-class label. They insisted that they are just “ordinary salary earners” (*daa gung zai*) or “ordinary Hongkongers” (*pou tung hoenggong jan*). The adoption of “nature names” (see Notes on names, romanizations, and translations) further blurs conventional identity categorizations, as it would be impossible to discern, for example, the gender or ethnicity of a student who calls themselves “Tree”.

Having said that, I would like to provide some general observations about the green living community based on my decade-long research, to help readers contextualize the motivations, actions, and intentions of the green people. Firstly, while there were variations in income and occupation among my interlocutors, none lived in poverty. This affords them certain capacities to act and create change, which is a privilege in itself. Secondly, practitioners of green living “range from those that operate merely within the logic of consumer culture to those that aim to radically reform it” (Lewis & Potter 2011, 17). The green people whom I discussed in this book are those aiming to bring about change by minimizing their participation in today’s consumerist culture. Thirdly, to fully understand the green people’s actions and rationales, one must consider Hongkongers’ relationship with their city *before* scrutinizing their perceptions of the so-called nature. As Frykman and Löfgren remark, “It is the alienation from the natural world that is a prerequisite for the new sentimental attachment to it. Nature must first become exotic in order to become natural” (Frykman and Löfgren 1987, 561). Finally, by embracing the label of “ordinary people”, the green people underscore that anyone can make a difference. Their solidarity is based more on their commitment to fostering a greener society than on class, gender, or political struggles. This commitment is rooted in the shared belief that transformative activism is achieved by living the change and teaching by example in everyday life.

**Green living as everyday transformative activism**

How do we interpret the global phenomenon of green and sustainable living? Over the past decades, academic literature in this field tends to zero in on a singular practice or a specific movement. These include the ethical consumption movement (Carrier & Luetchford 2012; Connolly and Prothero 2008; Lewis and Potter 2011), freeganism (Ernst 2010; Barnard 2011; Edwards and Mercer 2012; Lou 2019), the fair trade movement (Lyon and Moberg 2010; de Neve 2008; Nicholls and Opal 2005), alternative food networks (Andrews 2008; Goodman, E Melanie Dupuis, and Goodman 2012), veganism and vegetarianism (Maurer 2002; Cherry 2006; Alvaro 2020), household recycling and energy-saving (Hobson 2006), and minimalist living (Grigsby 2004; Craig and Parkins 2006), among others. While each of these movements warrants its own analysis, their intersections indicate the need for a more holistic approach. Encouragingly, the 2010s saw an uptick in the holistic studies of green culture, though most of them were based on case studies in North America, Europe, and Australia (Barendregt and Jaffe 2014; Gibson et al. 2013; McDonogh , Isenhour, and Checker 2011; Wehr 2011; Meyer and Kersten 2016). Tania Lewis’ edited volume stands out as the only collection focusing on green and sustainable lifestyles in Asia (Lewis 2016). Still, there is no book-length monograph dedicated to the exploration of everyday green practices outside the West. My book aspires to bridge this gap, offering an ethnographic study of green living in an Asian city while contributing to the broader theoretical discussions on social movements, environmentalism, and social transformation.

In classical social movement studies, green and sustainable living is not widely recognized as a proper social movement or a “variety of environmentalism” (Guha and Martinez-Alier 1997). Several factors underlie this limiting perspective. Firstly, because scholars of social movements often prioritize political outcomes and overlook the social implications of activism (Cox 2023, 60-61), they struggle to make sense of movements that have no clear policy demands (Williams 2017). Secondly, green living is frequently criticized for being too white, too elitist, and too individualistic (Meyer and Kersten 2016, 1). This bias against the “environmentalism of the rich” has catalyzed extensive research into the “environmentalism of the poor”, which greatly demystifies “the post-materialist thesis that the countries of the South…are too poor, too narrow-minded, or too relentlessly focused on the short-term to be Green” (Guha and Martinez-Alier 1997, xvii). While “environmentalism of the poor” has successfully diversified environmental narratives beyond the global North (Guha and Martinez-Alier 1997, xxi), it has inadvertently led scholars and activists to undervalue the relevance of “environmentalism of the rich”. There are undeniable challenges associated with green living in the “developed” world, but these shouldn’t be grounds for dismissal. If anything, its imperfections necessitate a closer and deeper examination.

Finally, as researchers are increasingly wary of the pervasive influence of neoliberalism, they are skeptical of any practice that calls for individual responsibility, seeing it as a “classic characteristic of advanced liberal governance, in which civil responsibility is reframed in terms of individual choice…at the expense ofstate care and conventional understandings of civil participation and citizenship” (Lewis and Potter 2011, 17). This skepticism is compounded by the thin line between green living and greenwashing. As a result, anthropology seldom positions green and sustainable living as a transformative social movement or a variety of environmentalism. The prevailing focus has been on sustainability within indigenous and pre-industrial communities of the global South (Ellen, Peter, and Alan 2000; Townsend 2000).

While having considerable validity, none of these criticisms provides a good enough reason to reduce all green practices and politics to a mere neoliberal caricature and negate its transformative potential (Lewis and Potter 2011, 17). In fact, these very shortcomings should be the catalyst for more discussions about radical and alternative pathways to tackle everyday environmental and sustainability challenges (Meyer and Kersten 2016, 1).

Yet, even for those who resonate with the ideal of green living, a prevailing doubt lingers regarding its impact. Indeed, the perceived “low impact” of green living is another reason why it hasn’t been acknowledged as a valid social movement. Such skepticism is particularly entrenched in academia. Whenever I highlight the green people’s efforts to reduce waste at a conference, the scholars in the room often challenge the broader effectiveness of such endeavors: “How impactful are individual actions?” “Are these efforts scalable?” “Is green living genuinely making a difference?” Interestingly, these are the exact same questions that people raised during the Umbrella Movement in 2014 and the Anti-ELAB Movement in 2019. In these movements, protesters were likened to an egg trying to shatter a high solid wall—a poignant metaphor written by the acclaimed Japanese author Murakami Haruki to depict an individual’s battle against the system (Tsang 2018).

Greta Thunberg once said, “When enough people come together, change will come, and we can achieve almost anything.” This sentiment offers a heartening response to the aforementioned questions—a reply that would resonate with all but the most cynical. So, where lies the hesitancy? I urge the questioners to reflect on *why* they asked those questions. Is the core of their concerns really the “effectiveness” of green living (which largely depends on how one defines effectiveness)? Or is it about *how* to make green living more effective and more scalable? The *how* question, while tremendously important, can be enormously paralyzing. It implies a need to ascertain a way to make something more effective and scalable before we can validate its worth. This mindset ensnares us in the trap of consequentialism, where the value of a movement is dictated by its outcome. But outcomes are multifaceted, cumulative, and often slow to manifest. Adopting a consequentialist lens towards social movements fails to recognize that “activism is a journey, not a means to an end” (Cox 2023, 33). Such a perspective limits our imagination, blinds us from seeing budding possibilities, and thus thwarts change before it gains traction.

Ultimately, these problems are rooted in an all-or-nothing mindset that is so prevalent—but detrimental—to our discussions of social and climate issues. This binary approach pits concepts against each other: rich versus poor, individual versus structural, superficial versus radical, personal versus political. But we all know that reality seldom sits at two poles. Is individual responsibility necessarily or only a manifestation of advanced liberal governance? Apparently not (Trnka and Trundle 2017). While certain facets of green living may appeal to the affluent, other dimensions are predominantly mobilized by the working-class. Recycling may seem superficial in terms of structural changes, but it could be radical in terms of self-transformation. As Sian Lazar rightly points out, “working on the self and acting on the world” is equally important, because transformative movements cannot happen without collective self-transformation (Lazar 2017).

In this book, I take issue with this all-or-nothing thinking and offer a fresh theorization on green and sustainable living. First, by drawing on multidisciplinary insights concerning the intersection of lifestyle and social movements (Haenfler, Johnson, Jones 2012), I posit that green living is neither shallow consumption “without deep-felt ideological conviction” (Barendregt and Jaffe 2014,3), nor a mere manifestation of neoliberal environmentality (Agrawal 2005a; Agrawal 2005b). Rather, I assert that green and sustainable living is a means, an aspiration, and a path towards social and political transformation. Through the lens of “everyday activism”, I emphasize the importance of individual actions in daily life (Scott 1985; Scott 1990; Mansbridge 2013; Meyer and Kersten 2016; Cox 2018; Frère and Jacquemain 2020) and shed light on “the theoretical blind spot at the intersection of private action and movement participation” (Haenfler et al., 2012:1). This approach not only challenges the rigid distinction between social movements and personal life, but it also broadens the narrow focus beyond spectacular protests, highlighting the role of “quiet” individual actions (Steele et al. 2021) in fostering social transformation. In doing so, I hope to shift our attention from the streets to the selves, challenging the idea that only high-profile social movements are credible agents of social change, while lifestyles are trivial by comparison (Haenfler et al. 2012; Mansbridge 2013).

Moreover, it is vital to consider “the diverse meanings and enactments” of responsibility beyond the theory of neoliberal responsibilization (Trnka and Trundle 2017, 3). As many scholars have critiqued, the pervasive and indiscriminate use of neoliberal responsibilization as the primary explanation for why people take responsibility risks erasing the complexity of a subject and the nuances of their lived experiences, as well as overshadowing other forms of personal responsibility (Trnka and Trundle 2017; Ganti 2014; Goldstein 2012; Hilgers 2012; Kingfisher and Maskovsky 2008; Rodgers 2018; Watts 2021). It is important to remember that the neoliberal emphasis on self-responsibility is just one way of understanding responsibility. Ideas of self-responsibility and self-cultivation are deeply ingrained in Eastern traditions like Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism—long before neoliberalism took root (Foucault 1988; Laidlaw 2014). Although these self-cultivation practices sometimes echo neoliberal values, they often challenge or overturn individualistic principles given their emphasis on relationality, social obligation, and reciprocity (Trnka and Trundle 2017, 3).

Building upon this renewed understanding of green living as transformative activism in the everyday, I will now turn to the intricacies of how individuals embody and exemplify these changes in Hong Kong, and the potential influence they wield in inspiring collective social transformation.

**The embodied politics of green living**

In her book *Notes Towards A Performative Theory of Assembly*, Judith Butler argues that through participation in strikes, assemblies, vigils, and other public gatherings (Butler 2015, 7), citizens put their bodies at the forefront of politics, giving rise to a kind of “embodied politics” that renders their grievances and demands visible (Butler 2015, 9-11). But as I have explained, many Hongkongers had grown disillusioned with this form of embodied politics in the years surrounding the Umbrella Movement in 2014. Year after year, people’s resonance with ritualistic demonstrations waned in the absence of tangible progress (Lee and Chan 2008, 84). For some, these public demonstrations became nothing more than just virtue-signalling. Of course, the Anti-ELAB protests in 2019 did recalibrate perceptions about the efficacy of public demonstrations. After all, as Butler stresses, the gathering of physical bodies is crucial to solidarity politics (Butler 2015). However, with diminishing freedoms of assembly and association following the imposition of the National Security Law (NSL) in 2020, alternative pathways became paramount. Even before the NSL came into play, the green living community often grappled with the question “What more can I do besides street protests?” A common response among my interlocutors was: *santai likhang*.

The Cantonese phrase *santai likhang* translates to “experience it yourself and put it into practice”. It comprises the Chinese words *santai*, denoting “body”, and *likhang*, meaning “practices”. Thus, *santai likhang* is essentially “bodily practices” that embody one’s convictions. It epitomizes an embodied politics whereby people do not simply diffuse advocacy, but are themselves active agents of change (Mansbridge 2013, 1). As YM reiterates, “True transformation begins with ourselves. Our bodies are the most potent instruments of change. Change is *santai likhang*.”

If Butler’s version of embodied politics centers on making grievances and demands visible through public assemblies (Butler 2015), then the embodied politics of *santai likhang* is about living the change and leading by example. By living the change that they wish to see, the green people refuted the hegemonic discourse of realpolitik in Hong Kong society (Hui and Lau 2015), which glorified a Machiavellian type of politics and power game “in its purest and shameless form” (Hui and Lau 2015, 356). In contrast, the embodied politics of *santai likhang* underlines the power of moral example. Instead of fixating on the “evil” and the “problem”, the emphasis was shifted towards virtues and solutions, allowing energies to be channeled into imagining the good and the otherwise. Simon Chau, a key figure in Hong Kong’s green living movement, once remarked, “If we don’t want to depend on nuclear power, we need to ask ourselves, what do we need to do to realize this? Have I changed towards what I want? We need to be the change that we want to see!”

To live the change that one wishes to see, people must first transcend their current predicament and envision the transformation. Only then can they strategize to manifest these visions in the present. Unlike an overnight revolution that would bring about an immediate but not necessarily “good” change, *santai likhang* is a slow and tender transformation that involves reflection, imagination, and practice. What are other possible ways to relate to ourselves, nature, and society (Flynn & Tinius 2015, 10)? The embodied politics of *santai likhang* challenges us to rethink what we can achieve in the present. It shows that the alternatives can be created within the shell of the old (Krøijer, 2015:89) and in moments of apparent impossibility (Graeber, 2009:x). In a nutshell, practitioners of *santai likhang* believe that political and social ideals “are experimentally realized in the ‘hear and now,’ in which activists attempt to construct aspects of the ideal society envisioned in the present, rather than waiting for them to be realized in a distant future” (Chow 2019, 35). Such reflexive and imaginative thinking may not be an express ticket to utopia, but it possesses enormous potential to disrupt the status quo (Pong 2011, 10-11; Flynn and Tinius 2015, 23), as at the heart of the climate crisis is our imaginative failure (Ghosh 2016).

Although embodied politics shares similarities with prefigurative politics, defined by Raekstad and Gradi as “the deliberate experimental implementation of desired future, social relations, and practices in the here-and-now” (Raekstad and Gradin 2019, 30), there are differences between the two. Likewise, *santai likhang* is not exactly the same as what David Graeber calls “direct actions” (Graeber 2009), even if there are clear overlaps between the two. I avoid using these terms in the context of green living because their genealogical roots might obscure the specificities of the Hong Kong situation. When Carl Boggs introduced the term prefigurative politics in 1977, he linked it to “different strands of anarchism, syndicalism, and Marxism” (Boggs 1977; Raekstad and Gradi 2019, 23). Similarly, David Graeber’s concept of direct actions is explicitly anarchistic, with “a tiny prefigurative element” (Graeber 2015, 440). In comparison, the embodied politics of *santai likhang* has no such ideological lineages. In my decade-long research on green living, the green people never used the term “prefigurative politics”, nor did they associate their practices and ideals with socialism or anarchism. At most, they alluded to the Chinese tradition of “self-cultivation” (*xiushen*). While I could adapt the definitions to fit my theorization, I prefer the notion of embodied politics as it is semantically aligned with the Chinese notion of *santai likhang,* which foregrounds the individual body as the major site of social engagement and social transformation.

**The power of example**

In addition to embodying change, *santai likhang* also signifies walking the talk and practicing what one preaches. In other words, a person’s actions should be consistent with their beliefs and values. If you are advocating for something, you should be living according to that advocacy. For example, the green people maintain that only those who strive to minimize waste in their daily lives are entitled to protest against the expansion of landfills. As one interlocutor reasoned, “Everyone resists having a landfill or an incinerator near their home. But how many of those objecting to such proposals actively reduce waste in their own lives? Those who haven’t made efforts to curb their waste don’t have the right to protest. If you want changes, you must start with yourself.”

The significance of walking the talk and practicing what you preach lies in its potency in setting an example for others. When individuals consistently align their actions with their professed values, they offer a compelling, living demonstration of those beliefs. This congruence between words and deeds not only lends credibility to their advocacy but also serves as a beacon for others to follow. Such authentic commitment extends beyond mere rhetoric; it becomes a potent method of influencing others, teaching them not through precepts (*yanjiao*) but through lived example (*shenjiao*).

Since ancient times, personal virtue has been deeply valued in Chinese society, stemming from a longstanding ethical-political ideal that “views societal political progress as anchored in prior individual self-transformation” (Zhang 2021; also see Tu 1979). This is why Confucianism stresses the importance of individual self-cultivation and uses cultural heroes and moral exemplars in imparting moral education (Munro 1975; Li 1990). Throughout history, such exemplary figures have served as influential role models, guiding emperors, magistrates, teachers, and parents in fostering moral integrity. The practice of *shenjiao*, literally teaching by example, has been a powerful means to educate, socialize, and discipline people (Reed 1995), thereby making people’s behaviors more predictable (Bakken 2000, 5). The aim is to maintain order and stability through what Bakken calls an “exemplary society” (Bakken 2000).

Anthropological perspectives on “example”, “exemplary”, and “exemplification” consistently spotlight a fundamental tension: Is exemplarity best understood as a general and ordinary model, or as a unique and extraordinary outlier? (Højer and Bandak 2015). Caroline Humphrey and Joel Robbins lean toward exemplarity as a generalized form of moral reasoning. However, while Humphrey emphasizes that exemplary transcends mere rule adherence (Humphrey 1997), Robbins stresses that it’s about realizing “specific values to the fullest extent possible” (Robbins 2018). Building on their ideas, Zhang conceptualizes exemplarity as a “pedagogical device” (Zhang 2021), whereas Heywood highlights how “ordinariness can come to be exemplified as a virtue” (Heywood 2021). Expanding on these insights, I argue that our understanding of exemplarity needs not be binary. In this book, I show that green living exemplars prove that their practices can be integrated into the daily routines of an ordinary person, aligning with the more generalized model. Conversely, for these exemplars to truly resonate with the public, *santai likhang* is essential. In the Hong Kong context, only those who genuinely “walk the talk” can effectively—and affectively—inspire and move others into action, placing *santai likhang* within a specific model of exemplarity.

While these theoretical debates about exemplarity are important, my interest in green living exemplars stems from a deeper concern about the state of moral subjectivity in Chinese societies and the power of moral example in shaping Hong Kong’s social movements (Lam-Knott 2019). Over the past four decades, the perceived moral vacuum that emerged in the wake of China’s economic reform has garnered attention from many scholars (Ci 2014, Yan 2021, Kleinman et al. 2011). Among them, philosopher Jiwei Ci offers a particularly insightful perspective, attributing this moral crisis to “a lack of exemplars”—a phenomenon that he describes as a “crisis of exemplification” in post-Mao China (Ci 2014, 22). Despite a marked improvement in material wealth and living standards, the Chinese find themselves in a sort of spiritual desolation, with “no moral leader to follow” and “no moral exemplar to emulate” (Ci 2014, 3)

To understand why the lack of exemplars had led China to a national moral crisis, it is vital to understand that the moral self in Chinese culture is essentially “formed on the basis of identification” (Ci 2014, 22). As Ci elaborates, “It is through identification with moral authority and moral exemplars that ordinary moral agents in a moral culture like China acquire an understanding of norms and the motivations to act in accordance with them” (Ci 2014, 22). While times have changed, “the reliance on exemplars remains largely unchanged in Chinese moral culture.” (Ci 2014, 22).

Ci’s analysis sheds light on the green people’s profound respect for *santai likhang*. However, there is a key difference between the situations in Hong Kong and mainland China, namely the enduring tradition of civil society in Hong Kong (Chan 2012; Chan 2010; Chan 2017). The largely self-mobilized green living movement owes much to Hong Kong’s dynamic civil society. Its vibrancy and robustness have been instrumental in supporting creative grassroots initiatives and preventing its citizens from feeling completely lost during periods of moral and political turmoil. Crucially, it fosters an environment where individuals aren’t just inspired by green living exemplars, but also aspire to become role models themselves. Whether at the protest sites or in the comfort of their own homes, these eco-conscious citizens set an example for their families, peers, and others in the community to follow. As Hong Kong moves towards an era of “leaderless movements” (Lee et al. 2019; Lai and Sing 2020; Liang and Lee 2021), a moral exemplar has become more important than ever. After all, only through walking the talk and living the changes in the most mundane aspects of everyday life can individual initiatives be transformed into lasting social changes from the ground up.

**Organization of the book**

This book comprises seven chapters, each exploring various facets of the green living movement in Hong Kong. Chapter 1 maps out the historical development of the green living movement and charts the rise of green citizens. It outlines the evolution of Hong Kong’s environmental movement since the late 1970s, with a focus on the transition from lobbying to the advocacy of a green and sustainable lifestyle. Chapter 2 delves into the green living practices of ordinary people and the exemplars who inspired them. From eating strangers’ leftovers at McDonald’s to embracing a freegan lifestyle, it illuminates the ways green living fosters new values, subjectivity, and moral examples, and its substantial affective power to inspire action. Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 explore the profound changes green living brings to personal lives and interpersonal relationships. While Chapter 3 examines nature’s healing power and its transformative impact on individuals, elucidating the interplay between self-transformations and social transformation, Chapter 4 discusses the strain green living places on familial and social relationships. Despite this, being an outlier within one’s familiar circles can often deepen one’s bond with like-minded individuals in the broader community. Following this, Chapter 5 portrays the green people’s aspirations to build a “green new world” in urban and rural Hong Kong. Through an investigation of the tension between indigenous and non-indigenous villagers in the New Territories, the chapter contrasts the conventional “Central values” and the emerging “village mindset” against a wave of anti-development movements in Hong Kong. In a related vein, Chapter 6 analyzes the green people’s reactions to “mainlandization” and their enthusiasm to reconnect with their “local soil” (*buntou*). Motivated by food safety concerns and a desire for greater personal, political, and economic autonomy, the green people launched the Agricultural Revitalization Movement in the wake of escalating localism. Finally, the concluding chapter is a manifesto for slow hope. By reflecting on the concept of “hope” and foregrounding its slowness, I draw parallels between the agricultural metaphors of “seeds” and “fruits” in both the green living community and Buddhist teachings, suggesting that while the exact moment of fruition remains unknown, we should have resolute confidence that the seeds of *santai likhang* will flourish eventually. The manifesto not only serves as a counter-narrative to the prevailing tales of climate and authoritarian dystopia; it is also an appeal to fellow scholars and activists that through stories of slow hope, we can empower people and expand their imaginations. Even though the present might appear bleak, I believe it is precisely during such challenging times that alternative politics brings out its fullest potential.

1. ***The Rise of Green Living***

“Everyone would tell you that they support environmental protection, but they expect you to do it *for them*. If people who have the awareness don’t do more, do you expect those who don’t have the awareness to do it for you?”

Yeah Man, a green living exemplar

Despite being one of the most successful economies in the region, Hong Kong’s prosperity has not come without a price. Similar to other countries in East Asia (Esarey et al. 2020), Hong Kong has been wrestling with environmental degradation following a period of rapid economic development in the twentieth century. Decades of unbridled development have destroyed both land and water ecosystems, irreversibly altering Hong Kong’s urban and rural landscapes (Chiu, Hung, and Lai 1999, 56; Lai 2000, 261) In the 1970s, concerns about environmental pollution began to surface, leading to a proliferation of environmental organizations during the 1980s (Chiu, Hung, and Lai 1999, 56; Hung 2012). This chapter traces the evolution of Hong Kong’s environmental movement since the late 1970s. In particular, I examine the decline of lobbying and the rise in popularity of green living within the broader historical and socio-political context of Hong Kong.

## From Westerners’ club to local green groups

Prior to the series of protests in 2019, the consensus was that Hong Kong people do not like confrontation and are unlikely to participate in protests over environmental issues (Chiu, Hung, and Lai 1999, 82; Lai 2000, 256). When protests did occur, they were usually spontaneous NIMBY (Not in My Backyard) protests galvanized by specific environmental hazards or potential health threats, such as the expansion of landfills or the construction of a new incinerator in residential areas (Fabian and Lou 2019). Intriguingly, NIMBY protestors, whose socioeconomic status ranged from urban poor to middle-class, were more likely to seek help from their district councilors rather than from environmental organizations. This was partly due to the reluctance of green groups to associate with NIMBY protests during the 1970s and 1980s (Chiu, Hung, and Lai 1999, 83). Back then, green groups typically prioritized the preservation of “nature” over human welfare. This is well-illustrated by a 1985 incident when environmentalists sided with the government to accuse pig and pigeon farmers of polluting rivers and water ecologies (Hung 2012). By contrast, green groups were more inclined to support NIABY (Not in Anyone’s Backyard) protests or movements that resonated with global environmental concerns, such as the global anti-nuclear movement that emerged following the Chernobyl nuclear disaster.

To understand why these environmental organizations were not interested in environmental issues that mattered to ordinary Hong Kong citizens (Hung 2012), it would be helpful to look at who was in charge of these organizations. Until the establishment of Green Power in 1988, most green groups in Hong Kong were run by foreign expatriates, elites, and middle-class professionals. The Conservancy Association (CA), the oldest environmental organization in Hong Kong, was founded in 1968 by a group of highly educated professionals inspired by environmental movements in the West (Chiu, Hung, and Lai 1999, 57). Two decades later, Friends of the Earth (FoE) and the World Wild Fund for Nature (WWF) set foot in Hong Kong, both of which were run by foreign elites, businessmen, and residents of the colonial upper-middle class. Since these environmental organizations tended to prioritize the conservation of a physical nature over the welfare of human beings, they failed to win broad-based support from the Chinese public (Chiu, Hung, and Lai 1999, 57; Hung, 2012; Choy 2011, 1). Locals perceived their environmental agendas as too “ivory-tower”, some even dismissed them as an “elite pastime” (Hung 2012). Their disconnection was so stark that the Hong Kong Chinese used to deride these green groups as *gwailou kui*, literally “Westerners’ Club” (Chiu, Hung, and Lai 1999, 58; Hung 2012).

The founding of Green Power in 1988 was a breakthrough. Thanks to Simon Chau, one of the co-founders of Green Power and father of Hong Kong’s green living movement, Green Power is the first environmental organization in Hong Kong that made serious efforts to localize global environmental discourses for the Hong Kong Chinese (Chiu, Hung, and Lai 1999, 68-69; Lai 2000, 280; Choy 2011, 9). It is also one of the first environmental organizations that emphasizes the importance of individual lifestyle in fostering environmental and social sustainability. The demographic composition of Green Power also differed from the international organizations in important ways. Although the core and founding members of Green Power were also highly educated public intellectuals, academics, and middle-class professionals, the majority of them were ethnic Chinese who were born, raised, and educated in Hong Kong (Choy 2011, 60).[[3]](#footnote-3) These Chinese intellectuals were among the first generation who felt that Hong Kong was not a refuge but a permanent home. Motivated by a strong sense of commitment to their hometown, these intellectuals devoted themselves to the betterment of society by advocating green living. In doing so, Green Power not only managed to recruit more local people to join them, but also promote green living as a variety of environmentalism in Hong Kong, which until then had been monopolized by a few international environmental organizations (Lou 2022).

By the 1990s, most environmental organizations in Hong Kong had integrated such a lifestyle approach into their education programs (Chiu, Hung, and Lai 1999, 84; Lai 2000, 278). By the late 2000s, there were a good number of local green groups and small civil society organizations (NGOs, NPOs, interest groups, social enterprises, charities, etc.) dedicated to the promotion of green living. The shift in focus has helped to absorb people who were previously absent and underrepresented into the green movement (Chiu, Hung, and Lai 1999, 73). For example, I have participated in green living workshops designed for low-income people in poorer neighborhoods. These workshops challenged the idea that green living is simply greenwashing or consumerism by endorsing the virtue of thrift and frugality in everyday life. It has also shifted green groups’ strategies from lobbying to public education and consciousness-raising.

**From lobbying to mobilizing**

For the most parts of the 20th century, green groups invested most of their time and resources in advocacy and lobbying (Chiu, Hung, and Lai 1999; Hung 2012; Lai 2000), seeing it as a constructive way to create changes. Instead of holding the government and big businesses accountable, many green groups took advantage of the opportunities to cooperate with them (Chiu et al., 1999:60). They had learned “when to push, retreat, and compromise” through the legislature and through the consultative framework (Chiu, Hung, and Lai 1999, 75): a tactic that Ho termed “embedded activism”[[4]](#footnote-4) (Ho 2007; Ho and Edmonds 2008). Of course, consensual environmentalism would not have worked if the government hadn’t been responsive to the green groups’ demands. At that time, incorporating elites from different sectors into the administration was part of the colonial government’s strategies to subdue the radicals, a tactic known as “administrative absorption politics” (King 1975). For example, when the Conservancy Association was first established, it was under strict monitoring as it was deemed by the colonial government as “a potentially subversive organization” (Chiu, Hung, and Lai 1999, 57). But since the Advisory Committee on Environmental Pollution “invited representatives of the CA into this businessmen-dominated board” (Chiu, Hung, and Lai 1999, 57), the Conservancy Association changed from being a “troublemaker” to a “good partner with the colonial state in environmental protection” (Chiu, Hung, and Lai 1999, 58). Friends of the Earth, too, was initially “no stranger to confrontational actions”, but it became less so since it was co-opted but the government (Chiu, Hung, and Lai 1999, 57). By mid-1990s, the “Big Four Environmental Groups” (*sei daai waan tyun*) of the time—Conservancy Association, Green Power, Friends of Earth, WWF—were all actively involved in advocacy within the government’s Advisory Committee (*ziseon waijyun wui*).

Financially, the inauguration of the Environment and Conservation Fund (ECF) in 1994 marked a major government support for local green groups. The ECF fund was created to “provide grants for research projects, environmental education, and community-based activities. Access to this important source of funding plays a significant role in strengthening the financial base of the environmental NGOs” (Hills and Barron 1997, 48).

Being an insider of the government’s consultative network has definitely “helped forge among environmentalists a sense of efficacy” (Chiu, Hung, and Lai 1999, 75). Over the years, environmentalists in Hong Kong have reached several milestones through tactful maneuvering within various administrative channels. The set-up of the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), for example, was a major victory for environmentalists (Chiu, Hung, and Lai 1999, 70). The victory has given many environmentalists the impression that it was indeed more productive to lobby and negotiate within the Advisory Committee than to mobilize the masses or to take a more confrontational approach. Furthermore, the long-term relationship forged between environmentalists and government officials has led the former to recognize that the government is not a homogenous entity and that it is possible to “build alliances with the relatively pro-environment faction against those officials less sympathetic to their causes” (Chiu, Hung, and Lai 1999, 75).

In addition to government funding, green groups also frequently sought sponsorship and funding from large corporations such as Shell, Esso Green Fund, and China Light & Power (Chiu, Hung, and Lai 1999, 67; Hung 2012; Lai 2000, 278), making them less likely to organize activities that could potentially embarrass their sponsors. Unsurprisingly, this approach was not without criticism. Even members of the Advisory Committee admitted that the perceived efficacy had swayed green groups to focus more on committee room lobbying rather than public outreach. They conceded that more could have been done to engage the general public (Chiu, Hung, and Lai 1999, 74).

However, this strategy began to change as Hong Kong transitioned into the post-handover era. The most notable shift was their move away from lobbying towards a renewed interest in public mobilization. Two factors could be responsible for this paradigm shift. First, the deteriorating relationship between the government and society hindered the effectiveness of embedded activism. A common complaint I heard from green groups during the first period of my fieldwork (2012-2013) was that the new government “refused to listen”, thereby rendering lobbying utterly useless. The large-scale yet peaceful public demonstrations that had been occurring since 2003 served as a testament to this mounting tension between the state and society. In particular, the seemingly “futile” struggle for democratization over the last two decades has forced Hong Kong’s civil society organizations to reassess their conventional strategies. Consequently, this led to calls for new strategies rooted in community engagement and the people’s everyday life.

Hong Kong green groups’ strategic transition away from lobbying was further driven by a societal transformation in the understanding of development and environmentalism. In the past, economic growth and urbanization were accepted as inevitable. Environmental protection, or *waanbao,* was considereda mere supplementary that could be achieved by planting more trees or using less electricity. Like other countries in East Asia, it was once an unspoken consensus that pollution was a “temporary sacrifice” for economic growth (Haddad and Harrell 2020, 24). As a result, discussions about environmental issues used to revolve around top-town pollution control rather than initiatives from the bottom up (Lewis 2016), and lobbying was well suited for this purpose. But as the environment continues to deteriorate due to the prioritization of economic development, “citizens across the region no longer automatically prioritize additional material growth over cleaner air, water, and soil” (Haddad and Harrell 2020, 6). In particular, the movements to preserve the Queen’s Pier in 2006 and Choi Yuen Village in 2011 profoundly shaped the ways a new generation of Hongkongers understood development, conservation, and sustainability (Ku 2012; Ng 2022). These conservation protests are not only landmarks of Hong Kong’s turn to “eco-developmentalism” (Esarey et al. 2020), they epitomize the irreconcilable difference between the government and the environmentalists regarding growth and development. As an environmentalist elaborated:

During the 1990s, few green groups would challenge the overall development paradigm. There was no opposition to the construction of the new airport even though it had reclaimed over 900 hectares of land from sea, ruining precious marine habitats.[[5]](#footnote-5) Today, no environmental organization would support the proposal of a third runway. Our environmental awareness is much higher now. That’s why we and the government can’t work together anymore. The government has yet to realize that our society is no longer satisfied with its pro-development stance.

Unlike classical developmentalists (Escobar 1999; Blaikie 2000), eco-developmentalists (Esarey et al. 2020) maintain that environmentally friendly policies are overall beneficial for society. They argue that “sustainable economic growth requires more sustainable environmental policies and practices” (Haddad and Harrell 2020, 28), and that ecological degradation need not be a trade-off of economic prosperity.

Alongside the turn towards eco-developmentalism, the perceived threat from China and the surge of local identity catalyzed a distinct wave of bottom-up resistance against development projects with transborder implications. Such projects included the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge construction, the Guangzhou–Shenzhen–Hong Kong Express Rail Link, and the urbanization of northeast New Territories. These initiatives triggered great anger within environmentalist circles, igniting a fresh wave of grassroots conservation and anti-development movements.

Unlike their predecessors who were reluctant to “politicize” environmental issues (Chiu, Hung, and Lai 1999, 82; Hung 2012), environmentalists in the 2010s accepted the inseparability of environment and politics. Not only were they more inclined to comment on politics when such issues impacted the natural environment and the everyday lives of ordinary citizens, but they also intentionally linked environmental concerns with other social and political matters in order to generate more publicity. As one politically active environmentalist asserted: “Like it or not, politics is already in our everyday life. There is no such thing as ‘pure environmental issues’ (*seon waanbou jitai*) anymore in Hong Kong.”

While this might appear to be a sudden shift, political scientist Wai-Man Lam has long countered the prevailing myth that Hong Kong’s residents are indifferent to public affairs. She contends that even though depoliticization is deeply embedded in Hong Kong’s political culture—often exemplified by the common refrain, “I am not interested in politics”—this culture does not stifle political activism. On the contrary, it has “facilitated alternative forms of politics in Hong Kong” (Lam 2004, 221). The embodied and prefigurative politics of green living stand as a testament to this claim.

The losing efficacy of lobbying, coupled with the turn to eco-developmentalism and the general increase of environmental consciousness, gave green groups new incentives to re-establish the much-needed interaction with ordinary citizens. But how did people react to their olive branch?

**The popularization of green living**

If we gauge the level of environmental interest through newspaper reports, the change is evident. From 1980 to 1991, 75.5% of the environmental reports in *Ming Pao*, a major daily newspaper in Hong Kong, addressed location-specific environmental problems within communities. These local protests, often referred to as “NIMBY” incidents, accounted for “6.2% of all 1,719 identified social conflict issues” during this period (Lai 2000, 262). In a more recent investigation, Chu revealed that the Cantonese term *waanbao* (environmental protection) averaged six mentions a day by the end of 2007, a stark increase from once every 2.5 days in 1998. How do we account for this surge of interest?

***Global appeal, local response***

When the United Nations introduced the idea of “sustainable development” in the Brundtland Report in 1987, it provided individuals, governments, and NGOs with an organizing principle for building a society that meets the needs of the present without compromising the future of the next generations (United Nations 1987). As a framework, it encourages citizens and governments to reconcile economic growth and ecological sustainability by taking account of the interrelationships between people, ecology, and resource use (Croll and Parkin 1992). The malleability of the concept allows different stakeholders to project their own aspirations onto this new household phrase (Robert, Parris, and Leiserowitz 2005). For citizens in affluent societies, this means taking personal responsibility for unsustainable behaviors, giving rise to a movement of sustainable living and ethical consumption (McDonogh, Isenhour, and Checker 2011, 113).

Undoubtedly, the surge of environmental interest in Hong Kong has been influenced by the global appeal for sustainability and environmental protection. However, this interest always comes paired with critical reflections on the specific local circumstances. For example, when the green people gave up the comfort and convenience offered by a modern, carbon-intensive lifestyle, it was not only a response to the global appeal to low-carbon living, but also a critique of Hong Kong’s prevalent convenience culture. “If we had to walk two miles to dispose of our garbage, will we still produce so much waste?” A green living practitioner said in an environmental event. Indeed, many green people have attributed Hong Kong’s environmental problems to people’s penchant for convenience, arguing that “the cost of convenience” (*fongbin dik doi gaa*) was simply too high (Lou 2019). For instance, when they realized that their preference for fast and inexpensive service eventually led to the downfall of smaller, slower businesses, they inadvertently constrained their own choices. Today, it has become exceedingly difficult to find non-chain small shops (*siu dim*) in Hong Kong. Increasingly, people complained that their choices are narrowing down to what the supermarkets offer: “The shops in Thailand sell 8 to 10 *kinds* of sugar. In Hong Kong, supermarkets sell eight to ten *brands* of the same sugar! Hongkongers are ‘poor’ because the only thing they have is money (*kung dak zi jau cin*).” Another green person added, “you want seedless watermelon, the big agricultural corporation will serve you genetically modified seedless watermelon. Is this the kind of convenience you want? We have only ourselves to blame.”

***Distrust of the Hong Kong SAR Government***

The rise of green living was also precipitated by a deep-seated distrust of the government and its history of inadequate environmental governance. For a city that was known as “a borrowed place living on borrowed time” (Hughes, 1976), sustainability had not been a priority for the British colonial government (Hills and Barron 1997; Lai 2000, 261; Wong 2011, 210). Although the years before and after 1997 were a turning point for Hong Kong’s politics and its environmental governance, like most environmental policies under British rule, environmental regulations enforced around this time focused mainly on ordinance implementation and pollution control. These included the legislation of the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Ordinance (1997), the introduction of Roadside Air Pollution Index (1998), and the installation of waste recycling in housing estates (Phase III) (1999) (Hills and Barron 1997, 42). Remarkably, the government’s first campaign on green living wasn’t launched until nearly a decade *after* Green Power introduced the concept to Hong Kong residents. Terms like “sustainability” and “climate change” only found their way into policy discourses in the late 1990s and early 2010s, respectively. Before that, environmental education was largely the responsibility of a few green figures and environmental NGOs, whose contributions to the popularization of green living surpass that of the government.

The Hong Kong government’s first green living campaign, titled “I Love Hong Kong! I Love Green!”, advocated for changes in four fundamental life areas: clothing, food, housing, and transportation. Recommendations included bringing personal cutlery and water bottles, donating old clothes to charities, avoiding disposable dinnerware, and setting the air-conditioner’s temperature above the recommended 25.5°C. While the campaign may have inspired some citizens to take up environmental protection, it had little impact on those already committed to green living. As numerous interviewees confirmed, they had been practicing green living long before long before the 2007 launch of the government campaign.

Take the reduction of food waste as an example. Although green groups and advocates of green living had been working tirelessly on the reduction of food waste since 2009, it was not until 2012 that the Hong Kong government established a steering committee to implement the Food Wise Hong Kong Campaign. Instead of acknowledging the government’s efforts to promote green living in Hong Kong, the overwhelming sentiment was that the government *hadn’t done enough*. To put it bluntly, it is the government’s incompetence that made the green people feel it was up to them to make a difference.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Another critique of Hong Kong’s environmental governance was the structuring of its civil services. Prior to the reorganization of government structure in 2022, the now-defunct Environment Bureau (2007-2022) consisted only of the Environmental Protection Department and the Energy and Sustainable Development Branch. Its work primarily revolved around policy development in environmental protection, energy, climate change, sustainable development, nature conservation, and environmental legislation, such as monitoring environmental quality, energy efficiency, waste management, etc. However, as of July 1, 2022, the Environment Bureau was revamped and expanded to become the Environment and Ecology Bureau, inheriting policies on environmental hygiene, food safety, agriculture and fisheries, and veterinary public health from the Food and Health Bureau. This restructuring was welcomed by many environmentalists because theoretically, the Environment and Ecology Bureau now holds greater authority to address the multifaceted nature of environmental issues that require an interdisciplinary approach.

Before the restructuring, interdepartmental collaboration was very limited due to a lack of incentives (Harris 2012; Hills and Barron 1997). Additionally, there was “no guarantee that branches and their associated department(s) will see issues in the same way or agree upon the courses of action to be followed” (Hills and Barron 1997, 45). As Hills and Barron described, “fragmentation of responsibility, lack of communication and competition between different branches and departments, and the absence of a strategic policy on the environment" severely restricted the pursuit of sustainable development in the territory (Hills and Barron 1997, 48-49).

The problem of fragmentation was particularly salient in trans-sectoral areas like environmental health and waste management. As a senior civil servant confessed to me back in 2013: “In Hong Kong, waste is handled by the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) under the Food and Health Bureau (FHB). The Food and Health Bureau is a bureau managed by health and medical professionals, whose primary concern is hygiene, cleanliness, and a germ-free environment. Environmental protection is the last thing they have in mind.” This sentiment was echoed by a former employee of FEHD, who added, “FEHD has nothing to do with environmental protection. They deal with things like rats, mosquitoes, and garbage collection. It’s ridiculous that the FEHD is put in the front line of our city’s waste management.”

Recycling is another area badly affected by the government’s fragmented approach to environmental governance. Since the rollout of the Waste Reduction Framework Plan in 1998, the government installed over 22,000 waste separation bins (more commonly known as *saam sik tung*, or “three colors bins”) to promote public participation in recycling. Depending on the location of the bins, recycling bins in Hong Kong were overseen by four different departments, including the Environmental Protection Department (EPD), the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD), the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD), and Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD). For example, recycling bins placed in a country park were likely to be managed by the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department, whereas a bin found on the street of Mong Kok would be the responsibility of the Food and Environmental Hygiene.

When the green people realized that the Environmental Protection Department (EPD) was not the only department overseeing recycling in Hong Kong, they were infuriated. This fact came to light during a visit my green friends and I made to the Eco Park (*waanbou jyun*) in 2013, an industrial park focused on waste-sourcing and funded by the Hong Kong government. Upon inquiring about the “after-lives” of the items we recycled, the Eco Park staff assured us that all plastics collected by the EPD would be handled in their facility. But they were not sure about recyclables collected by other departments. “What do you mean you’re not sure?” A Green friend of mine asked. “Are you saying that our efforts to recycle are futile? That everything would be dumped to the landfills after all?” Another one asked with consternation. The atmosphere turned awkward as what was meant to be an enlightening experience led to disquieting revelations.

My green friends’ suspicion was not unfounded. In May 2013, a refuse collection contractor was caught red-handed by a local newspaper for dumping the recyclables to the landfills. The contractor denied the allegation, claiming that they were forced to dispose of the recyclables because people did not properly clean them before disposal. There is no way to tell if it was an excuse, but contaminated recyclables were a major concern among the green people in Hong Kong, especially after the Chinese government launched Operation Green Fence in February 2013 to filter out sub-standard foreign waste (*joeng laap kap*). According to our guide at the EcoPark, only 1% of the recyclable materials were treated locally in Hong Kong. The remaining 99% of the materials were exported to mainland China or other countries for further reprocessing. In other words, Hong Kong’s “recycling industry” is limited to the primary phase of the recycling process. As a representative of Green Power said, “Hong Kong does not recycle waste (*mou zoizou*), it only collects waste (*jau wuisau*)”.

Although the government insisted that the Green Fence Policy had little impact on Hong Kong’s recycling industry, figures from the EPD show that exports of local recyclables and trans-shipments of overseas recyclables to China indeed slowed down (Public Information Centre 2013). There were also rumors that a large quantity of waste had been stranded in Hong Kong since the enforcement of the Green Fence Policy.

In addition to the mounting pressure from Operation Green Fence, the government’s proposal to expand the three existing landfills and build an incinerator caused further outrage within the green living community. According to the Hong Kong government, the per capita waste production in Hong Kong surpasses that of economically comparable cities like Taipei and Seoul. Even though the government implemented a recycling scheme since 1998, Hong Kong’s recycling rate remains very low. Each day, over 14,000 tonnes (i.e. metric ton) of solid waste still end up in landfills (Environment Bureau 2013). Kam-sing Wong, the former Secretary for the Environment in Hong Kong, insisted that the proposal for “three landfills, one incinerator” proposal (*saam deoi jat lou*) was “a necessary evil” as previous administrations had waited too long to take action, leading the landfills to reach capacity (Lou 2019). He also refuted the suggestion by the green living community that a comprehensive recycling policy would significantly alleviate the strain on Hong Kong’s existing landfills:

Regrettably, there are still misunderstandings that landfilling and the integrated waste management facility could be shelved if Hongkongers worked harder on waste reduction and recycling. The truth is, Hong Kong treats more than 9,000 tonnes of residual municipal solid waste a day. One by one, our three landfills are going to reach capacity by 2019. This means we must extend them to give some Hong Kong breathing space, so that we have time to put in place a plan for waste reduction, recycling and treatment infrastructure.

The stance of the EPD was that, while landfilling is unsustainable in the long run, Hong Kong needs it as a temporary solution to avoid becoming overrun by mountains of waste. Unsurprisingly, the green people were not convinced. Many were angered by the government’s fearmongering approach. As Mr. Tong candidly stated: “The government claims they will implement a Waste Disposal Charging Scheme (*laap kap zing fai*) after they expand the landfills. Do you believe them? Can you really trust a government that always eats its own words (*zau sou*)? Once the landfills are expanded, they wouldn’t care anymore (*gwo zo hoi zauhai sansin*)!”

In essence, the green living community doubted the government’s ability to effectively address Hong Kong’s environmental challenges. The solution, they insisted, rests with the individuals: it is the responsibility of every Hongkonger to cut waste at source (*jyun tau gaam fai)*.

***“Hong Kong is our home”***

If global appeals for sustainability and skepticism towards the Hong Kong government were the immediate catalyst of the rise of green living, the deeper drive was rooted in people’s affection for and identification with Hong Kong, a city that they call “home”. This sense of belonging and civic responsibility emerged, on the one hand, from people’s pride in Hong Kong’s remarkable economic success. On the other, it was actively forged by the colonial government’s initiatives, such as the Keep Hong Kong Clean campaign of the 1970s (Lou 2022).

Following the unrest in 1967, the British colonial government enacted a range of reforms covering housing, welfare services, crime control, and urban development, all in an effort to regain political trust among the Chinese populace. As sociologist Tai-lok Lui notes, these social overhauls from the 1960s to the 1980s helped establish a sense of community in Hong Kong (Lui 2012:121). The emergence of this “imagined community” (Anderson 1983), Lui said, could be traced to the introduction of new social etiquettes such as queueing and keeping the public spaces clean (Lui 2012, 121). These social etiquettes were an attempt on the part of the colonial government to generate a new form of civic pride based on shared concerns about environmental hygiene. Furthermore, they served as disciplinary techniques to create a type of colonial citizens who recognized their responsibilities but not their political rights (Lui 2012, 122-123; Law 2020, 202). All of these are in keeping with the colonial government’s interests in molding a population of Homo economicus (Law 2020, 202) and “maintaining a stable and apolitical workforce” (Ho 2010, 73; Lam-Knott 2018). Indeed, early sanitary campaigns in the 1950s and 1960s in Hong Kong promoted practices of personal and household hygiene without hinting at civic responsibility. In contrast, the Litter Bug (*Lap Sap Chung*), the iconic cartoon of the famous “Keep Hong Kong Clean” campaign, was crafted to nurture a new generation of responsible citizens in Hong Kong. The character quickly became a household name and gained popularity following a series of innovative publicity campaigns, especially among those who grew up in the 1970s (Lou 2022).

As efforts to clean Hong Kong started to see results, Hongkongers were increasingly portrayed as responsible citizens rather than uncivilized offenders in all campaign posters and TV adverts (Lou 2022). Consequently, the wicked Litter Bug was swapped by the righteous Dragon of Cleanliness (*Cing Git Lung*); and the slogan “Everybody Hates Littering” was replaced by the more positively sound “Everybody Loves A Clean Hong Kong”. By the 1990s, concepts such as “care” and “responsibility” played a vital role during this phase of the campaign. This was particularly obvious in the celebrity-led campaign song “Let’s Pitch In”. By facilitating rhetoric like “we are one big family” and “we’re proud of this place”, the idea that Hong Kong was everyone’s home started to flourish. Since then, the colonial government had rolled out more campaigns based on this theme, such as the “Hong Kong is Our Home, Let’s Keep It Clean” campaign in 1992, whose slogan was so well-received that it is still in use today (Lou 2022). The gradual replacement of “paternalistic posters” (Ho 2010, 74) with “community-building” campaigns was partly a response to Hongkongers’ improved awareness of environmental hygiene, and partly an active effort to nurture a sense of belonging in Hong Kong in order to counteract Chinese nationalism and Chinese propagandas (Ho 2010, 72-73). The Keep Hong Kong Clean campaign is widely recognized as one of the most influential and successful government initiatives in modern Hong Kong history (Lui 2012). It shifted people’s attitudes and behaviors, encouraging them to take responsibility for their city’s cleanliness and instilling in them a sense of civic pride and duty. This campaign, more than altering views on sanitation and public hygiene, fostered a new sense of “home” among the residents.

this new sense of home must be understood in light of the post-World War II migration. In the wake of the war, Hong Kong was home to a mere 500,000 inhabitants. But by 1953, the population jumped to 2.5 million due to a large influx of refugees from mainland China. It’s estimated that nearly 776,000 mainland Chinese migrated to Hong Kong between 1949-1950 in pursuit of a better life. By 1961, 50.5% of Hong Kong’s residents were born in mainland China, compared to 47.7% born in Hong Kong (Zheng and Wong 2002).

The 1990s marked the first time people on this island began to identify themselves as Hongkongers. For the first time, they saw Hong Kong as more than just a refuge from China's turmoil, but a place where indigenous villagers, immigrants, and the next generations could establish roots and call this place “home” (Mathews 1997; Lou 2022).

***The intertwining of environment and politics***

In Hong Kong, politics is often articulated through environmental discourses and environmental metaphors. I will explain this in greater depth in Chapter 6. For now, let me illustrate this point with two examples. The first relates to the anti-nuclear plant movement in 1986, which garnered over a million signatures in Hong Kong. The protest wasn't solely a response to the Chernobyl Disaster that occurred in the same year; it was also fueled by the population's deep-seated distrust of the Chinese government and its capability to safely manage a nuclear plant. As Michael Gallagher wrote in his 1991 article “Hong Kong fears Chinese Chernobyl”:

“It is difficult to separate their worries about nuclear plant safety from their fears about Hong Kong’s political future…Technical difficulties and fear of a devastating earthquake aside, Hong Kong’s worries about Daya Bay[[7]](#footnote-7) may be less technical and more psychological in nature…With only six years remaining until the colony is returned to Chinese control, Hong Kong’s inhabitants are increasingly worried about what their lives will be like under Chinese rule. The Tiananmen Killings and continuing repressions have only ratcheted Hong Kong’s fears to a high level (Gallagher 1991, 9-11).

Fireworks pollution serves as a more recent example of how environmental issues are being framed as political problems. Each year on October 1st, the Hong Kong government commemorates the National Day of the People’s Republic of China with spectacular firework displays. But as tensions between Hong Kong and China escalated, some began to question the necessity of such lavish celebrations, highlighting the environmental impact of fireworks. As one veteran environmentalist commented, “When I watched the fireworks, all I can think of are Respirable Suspended Particulates, Volatile Organic Compounds, arsenic, mercury particles, barium, chromium, titanium, and 1,4-dioxin, the cancerous emission from incinerator! According to a report by the Environmental Agency in the U.K., the 35 tons of firework displays emitted during the Millennial celebration in London equaled 120 years of dioxin emissions from a waste incinerator. Knowing this, would you still look at fireworks the same way?”

In 2015, fireworks pollution made it to the headlines of *Apple Daily*, once the best-selling anti-Chinese Communist Party newspaper that ceased publication in 2021 due to the National Security Law. The headline proclaimed, “Dark Clouds Looming Overhead (*wu wan bat saan*): Cancerous Pollutants Soared after the Firework Celebrations on Chinese National Day.” The story has instigated some politically charged comments online:

The National Day doesn’t mean anything to Hongkongers. Why are we celebrating it?

The dark clouds have been looming over Hong Kong since 1997!

What’s so surprising about the poisonous fireworks? The mainland has been emitting all kinds of toxins into Hong Kong anyway.

What a waste of money and human resources. Please don’t do it again next year!

Even though the green people tended not to see such “recasting” (Choy 2011) as a practice of politicization, as the rest of my book will show, the rise of the green living movement is inseparable from, and indeed shaped by, the city’s social, economic, and political climate, just as the way rocks are shaped by wind and water. Early in my fieldwork, I was captivated by the intricate connections between environmental and socio-political issues in Hong Kong. Whenever I posed the open-ended question, “what do you think of Hong Kong’s environment” (*nei gok dak hoenggong ge waanging dim joeng*?), I often received the response, “What environment?” While some interpreted my question as an inquiry into their perspectives on Hong Kong's natural environment or environmental challenges, like waste reduction or recycling, others immediately centered their responses on the city’s political climate, requiring no further prompting. Mary, for example, was very outspoken in her criticism of the government: “What do I think of the environment? Gosh! The biggest problem is the government. They like to destroy things. They destroy our environment!” Robin, an environmental consultant at a private agency, shared Mary’s anger: “Hong Kong’s natural environment is deteriorating because our political environment is deteriorating, and I think it will only get worse!”

We can see that the notion of the “environment” (*waanging*)—whether it is social, political, or spiritual environment—is “subject to very different sets of contextual conventions that mediate their translation into public politics” (Appadurai 1990, 300). Therefore, it is important to view the rise of green living as also a response to environmental challenges, but also as a comprehensive critique of current affairs, development-oriented mindset, consumerism, and a lack of spiritual fulfilment.

**From light green groups to deep green exemplars**

Within the sphere of green living, the terms *waanbao* (environmental protection) and *luksik* (green) are often used interchangeably*.* The public usually views the two as the same, but key figures in the green living movement maintain that there are subtle differences between them. During our very first meeting in 2012, Yeah Man, a green living exemplar for young people, elaborated on these differences: “In my view, *waanbao* is the entry level of *luksik*; *waanbao* focuses on the technocratic fix. A *waanbao* person might use an energy-efficient air-conditioner, whereas a *luksik* person would opt for an electric fan, and a person who lives a simple life (*gaan pok saang wut*) would prefer a hand fan. As you can see, there are varying shades of green (*cang ci soeng bat tung*).”

Simon Chau made an even bolder statement about the distinction between *waanbao* and *luksik*. Despite being the most iconic environmentalist in Hong Kong since the 1980s, Chau refuses to call himself an environmentalist. “I don’t do environmental protection (*gaau* *waan bou*). I am a warrior of green civilization (*luksik manming*)! I strive to transform the ways people think and live (*ji fung ji zuk*).” Later, a supporter of Chau clarified his statement to me: “Environmentalists treat only the symptoms. They don’t treat the root causes. Most environmental groups are like a watermelon, they’re green on the outside, but red inside”.

When lifestyle-oriented Green Power was founded in the late 1980s, environmental protection (*wannbao*) encompassed light green remedial measures like efficient sewage processing, waste management, maintaining street cleanliness, and controlling air and noise pollution (ATV 2012, 136). Dissatisfied with this superficial approach, the environmentalists at Green Power aimed to introduce a deeper hue of green to the public. My interlocutors followed in these footsteps, championing green living and challenging the prevalent view that technological advancement is the panacea to all environmental problems in the Anthropocene. This time, however, they pivoted from green groups, which, to quote a green friend, are often “watermelon-like in nature,” to focus on various green living exemplars, whose life stories inspired many, thanks to extensive media coverage and the internet. In the next chapter, I will explore how these deep green exemplars embody “viable alternatives to modern social and political arrangements” (Escobar 2012, 71-72) not only by living the changes themselves, but also by setting a moral example for their peers in their everyday lives.

1. ***Live the Change***

It is imperative to bring people who are living the change together in this challenging time. Be they the green or the anti-corporate activists, the vegetarians or the animal rights advocates, people who walk the talk can change Hong Kong from the bottom-up.

Pong Yat-Ming, *The Anti-Oligarchy Handbook*, 2012

Kowloon East, a district that includes the former Kai Tak Airport and business hubs of Kwun Tong and Kowloon Bay, was once a bustling industrial heartland. That was until the late 1980s, when the manufacturing sector took its business to mainland China. A couple of decades later, the Hong Kong SAR government announced plans to revitalize the old industrial district into a green community that promotes sustainable development and low-carbon building designs. The opening of the first Zero Carbon World (*Ling Taan Tin Dei*) in 2012 showcased over 80 state-of-the-art green technologies. It marked the government’s initial venture in regenerating this dwindling industrial area into a vibrant green community.

Roughly 600 meters from the Zero Carbon World was the Kowloon Bay Waste Recycling Centre (KBWRC), another official “Green Check Point” highlighted in the Kowloon East Regeneration Plan. In 2011, the Hong Kong branch of Tzu Chi, a renowned international Buddhist Charity Foundation with branches across North America, Australia, and Asia, won a government tender to partner with the KBWRC’s Material Transfer Centre, a regional hub that supported the transfer of recyclable materials to the Eco Park that I mentioned in Chapter One.

On a sweltering, humid day in June 2013, I was invited by Ngon-zai to tour Tzu Chi’s Recycling Point in Kowloon Bay. I had met Ngon-zai at a green event organized by the Make a Difference Social Lab, a community NGO funded by the Hong Kong Jockey Club Community Project Grant at the time of my fieldwork. A fresh Waste Management graduate from Europe, the 26-year-old was eager to “make a difference” in Hong Kong. He said, “I want to introduce Tzu Chi and their volunteers to the latest recycling technology. We can’t always do everything by hand (*m ho ji haahaa kaau jansau heoizou*).”

Yet, Yet, Ngon-zai’s enthusiasm for advanced green technology was not shared by many at Tzu Chi. As Dai *si hing*[[8]](#footnote-8) told me: “Money and technology will not solve our environmental problems. We need to change the way we live. The biggest difference between Tzu Chi and other green groups is that Tzu Chi doesn’t depend on high technology to save the Earth. Our teacher Dharma Master Cheng Yen teaches us to “protect the environment with our hands” (*jung soengsau zou waanbou*).

To convince me, Dai *si hing*’s colleague Wong *si hing* invited me to join their all-volunteer recycling team at the Recycling Point in Kowloon Bay. I recall the weather was typically Hong Kong for June—scorching sun and stuffy air. As I stepped into the semi-alfresco recycling site, I was met with stacks of compressed plastics, a jumble of electric wires, and grubby plastic bottles. The four volunteers on the site--—all middle-aged women—were disassembling a heap of old VHS tapes when Wong *si hing* introduced them to me. The woman with short grey hair quickly briefed me before I embarked on my task: “Look, the cassettes and the reels have to go to that rattan basket, not this one”, she gestured. “The screws and other metals go here. The film goes to this bin bag. You sort the reels, okay?”

Surrounded by bales of compressed plastics, the recycling scene at Tzu Chi reminded me of the scrap workers in Guiyu, China, a place I visited with my PhD supervisor for a project on e-waste. The division of labor was clearly defined on the site. Each volunteer concentrated on a specific component of the VHS tape. When one painstakingly removed screws, others busied themselves with disassembling the metal pieces or unfurling the film from reels. The deftness of these volunteers was comparable to the highly skilled workers in Guiyu, who eked out a living from e-waste scraps, except that these volunteers did it for free. It was arduous work. Why did they insist on sorting the recyclables manually when there are technologies to help them do the job?

To be clear, Tzu Chi is not an anti-technology organization. In fact, in 2008, the Tzu Chi in Taiwan pioneered a unique recycling technology that reprocessed PET bottles into textile products, with 100% of the net proceeds funnelled towards those in need. They called this technology “Big Love Technology” (*daai ngoi fo gei*). Intriguingly, nobody at the Hong Kong branch had much to say about this innovation. They did, however, tirelessly tell me about their “recycling Bodhisattvas” and the meticulous work they put into ensuring the quality of Tzu Chi’s recyclables by carefully sorting and cleaning PET bottles, as well as removing caps and bottle rings. That was when I began to understand why they placed so much emphasis on “protecting the environment with our hands”. (*jung soengsau zou waanbou*). It was neither merely an adherence to the teachings of Dharma Master Cheng Yen nor a resistance to advanced technology. They favoured labour and rudimentary technologies because their strenuous efforts and hardships under the hot and humid conditions embodied the spirits and values of the Bodhisattvas. In other words, they were not only doing good deeds as “recycling Bodhisattvas”, they were also setting an example for others to follow—to inspire more Bodhisattvas!

This rationale is by no means exclusive to Tzu Chi’s green Buddhists. Indeed, it is a belief shared by every green living practitioner I came to know in Hong Kong. This chapter is an ethnography of how these green people walked the talk and lived the change in their everyday life. I begin with five of Hong Kong’s most well-known green living exemplars: Simon Chau, Yeah Man, Brother Au, Pong Yat-ming, and Lam Lai-shan. Subsequently, I discuss their influence on ordinary people and how these individuals, in turn, inspired others through their innovative “green-technics”.

**Walk the talk**

***Simon Chau: The green civilization transformer***

When Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) aired a documentary about Simon Siu Cheong Chau’s “back to nature” lifestyle in 1985, it sparked both considerable interest and controversy. Although Chau is now widely regarded as the pioneer of Hong Kong’s green living movement, opinions regarding his lifestyle were predominantly negative back then. As my green friend Bobby reminisced: “Nobody understood what *waanbao* (environmental protection) or *luksik* (green) meant. They were all new ideas to Hongkongers. We thought Simon Chau was crazy—he didn’t eat meat; grew his own food; cycled to work; and brought his own bag to the shop. He didn’t have an air-conditioner even he could afford one! Most of us now take these eco-friendly actions for granted, but it has taken Chau more than 30 years to promote them! Chau is truly a pioneer of his time!”

On the 30th anniversary of this documentary film, a green group hosted a film night and invited the audience to reflect on Hong Kong’s green evolution. During the Q&A, the older audience recalled their initial shock upon first viewing it 30 years ago, while the younger audience admired his foresight.

Although it seems Chau’s efforts are now better recognized and green living has become increasingly popular, I wasn’t sure if social attitudes towards alternative and radical lifestyles have undergone a fundamental shift. This occurred to me when the Sky Post published a story about the lifestyle of Yeah Man in 2022, another well-known green living exemplar almost 40 years younger than Chau. The report highlighted how Yeah Man supported a family of four with just 10,000 HKD a month (approximately 1282 USD), and how they lived happily without an air conditioner and a television. The storyline of the report bore a striking resemblance to Chau’s documentary film from almost 40 years ago, so did some people’s reactions to it. Scrolling through the harsh comments about Yeah Man’s lifestyle, I found numerous parallels existed between the online trolling that Yeah Man endured and the attack on Simon Chau, despite the decades separating them.

In both instances, they were severely criticized for “depriving” their children of air conditioning. Some even viewed this as “abuse”, alleging that they were not only “exposing” their children to mosquitoes, but also “shielding” them from integrating into mainstream society and learning the “core values” of Hong Kong. As one netizen said, “When other children are playing the latest video games, their children wouldn’t even know what is on TV. How sad! I’m sure they would be bullied in school.” Another typed, You’ve subjected your children to a disadvantaged upbringing. Why inflict your eccentricities on your children?”

Despite this, we must not overlook the hundreds of supportive comments from the green living community, who flocked to Yeah Man’s social media account to defend his unconventional lifestyle: “I don’t know where people got the idea that Yean Man’s sons were deprived. They have so many toys, most of them were rescued from waste bins!” “Money can’t buy happiness. Support you!” “I really appreciate how you and your wife walk the talk, not just talk! Your children are the happiest kids in Hong Kong. They get to spend lots of time with their mom and dad. That’s priceless! Keep going! Support you and your family!”

In the midst of the debate, Yeah Man left this message on Simon Chau’s YouTube page: “Thank you so much, Cheong Gor. I learned about your lifestyle 18 years ago. It opened my eyes and led me to live a green life. Thank you for everything. I hope more people will be inspired.”

When I met Cheong Gor [the nickname of Simon Chau] in 2012, he had just left Club O to establish Lifeflow + Greenwoods, a green spiritual enterprise that promotes raw veganism and spiritual healing. His move hardly surprised anyone. Born in 1947, Cheong Gor is among the first generation of Hong Kong-born residents who regard Hong Kong as their only home. Prior to this, Hong Kong was primarily seen as a hub for merchants and traders during the early colonial era and later as a sanctuary for those fleeing the Cultural Revolution in China (Choy 2011, 60). Unlike his predecessors, who were thought to have no real ties to the place, Chau's love for Hong Kong inspired him to contribute to the city. Since the 1970s, Cheong Gor has co-founded numerous green groups in Hong Kong. These include Green Power (1988)—the first green group led by local Chinese intellectuals; Produce Green (1989)—the first organic farm in Hong Kong; the Vegetarian Society (1995)—the first non-religious vegetarian group in Hong Kong; and Club O (2004)—the first green living education foundation. Lifeflow + Greenwood (2005) was his latest experiment.

An accomplished scholar in linguistics, Cheong Gor became a professor in translation studies after receiving his PhD from the University of Edinburgh in the 1980s. After 15 years in academia, he resigned from his tenured position at Hong Kong Baptist University, choosing instead to dedicate himself to the promotion of green living. For the past four decades, Chau has introduced the people of Hong Kong to many new trends and ideas, either through the organizations that he founded or the books that he authored and translated. He has published more than 230 short books on a wide array of subjects: environmentalism, green politics, nature conservation, animal welfare, green living, green consumption, natural and alternative medicine, breastfeeding, feminism, veganism, green funerals, cycling, organic farming, home-schooling, eco-tourism, reiki, fasting, meditation, spirituality. In addition, he is famous for his anti-colonial, anti-nuclear, anti-GM, anti-immunization, anti-biomedicine, and inter-faith stances. Some of these ideas were—and still are—highly controversial. That’s why while some consider him a trend-setter, others dismiss him as a lunatic. Among the many things that Cheong Gor advocates, his recent commitment to raw veganism is considered the most radical. Most Chinese are unconvinced that it is healthy to consume so much “cold” (*saang laang*) food, which goes against the fundamental principle of hot-and-cold balance in traditional Chinese medicine (Lou 2014).

Chau’s unconventional approach has attracted much criticism, particularly from environmentalists concerned with the city’s environmental policies. They accuse Chau—who is arguably the most recognized environmentalist in Hong Kong—of avoiding more urgent issues, such as unchecked urbanization and the expansion of landfills (Lou 2014). They also questioned the validity of raw veganism and spiritual ecology. Ever the defiant one, Chau insisted that the green movement should focus on “changing people’s hearts and values” rather than making deals with governments or creating technological fixes. In an article he wrote in the 1990s, he maintained that “environmental problem” is a misnomer. The ecological crisis, he claimed, is really “a worldview problem, a political problem, and a spiritual problem. It has its origin in people’s hearts”. He went on to argue that if we want to save the Earth, we must first save ourselves first. “A green civilization begins with self-transformation. Only after that can collective transformation occur”.

I once asked Cheong Gor how he managed to convince others despite the controversies. His response was simple but firm, “There is only one way. If you truly believe in what you are doing. You walk the talk and others will eventually see that you’re right.”

## *Brother Au: The master of simple living*

Simon Chua was not the only person who inspired Yeah Man to live a green life. In many ways, Yeah Man’s life in the countryside was a tribute to the simple living of Au Gi-fu, or Brother Au, who was best known in the green living circle as the “master of simple living” (*gaan pok saang wut daai si*). Born in the 1940s, Brother Au is a few years older than Simon Chau. But unlike Chau, Brother Au’s core identity was not tied to Hong Kong. This could be because Brother Au, like me, was born and raised in Macau. After high school, he moved to Taiwan to study chemical engineering, hoping that a degree in chemistry would prepare him for the manufacturing boom in the 1960s. Following his graduation from the National Taiwan University, Brother Au received a full scholarship to pursue postgraduate studies in polymer chemistry in Switzerland. Eight years later, he was headhunted by Taiwanese billionaire Wang Yung-ching to work for his plastic empire, the Formosa Plastics Corp, which is one of the world's largest plastic manufacturers today.

It was a secure, well-paid, and respectable job. Yet at the age of 42, Brother Au decided to quit his job because he did not want to “live against his conscience” (*wai bui loeng sam*):

After working in the plastic plant for ten years, I started to ask myself if what I was doing was right, if the money I earned was moral, and what kind of person I wanted to become. The answer couldn’t be clearer. As soon as I walked out of the plastic plant, I knew something was wrong. The air emitted from the plant smelled horrible, and the water was black. Needless to say, all the disposals from the plant were toxic. This is still the case today. I didn’t want to live against my conscience, so I quit my job. I think everyone should reflect on what they are doing and be mindful of the consequences of their actions.

After leaving his job, Brother Au spent five years visiting different landfills, garbage dumps, recycling plants, and environmental organizations around the world, hoping to find a solution for the environmental crisis. Like Simon Chau, he concluded that if we want to change our society, we must first change people’s hearts. How do we do that? Brother Au believes it can be achieved through ethical self-cultivation and life education (*saangwut gaaujuk*). Unlike conventional schooling, which primarily focuses on disciplining, life education is taught by example.

To demonstrate how to live without exploiting the environment, in 1988, Brother Au set up the Pure Land of Yanliao (*yanliao jingtu*) on the coast of Hualien, Taiwan. The Pure Land of Yanliao nestles in a serene fishing village, cradled between two mountain ranges, with a panoramic view of the Pacific Ocean. In Chinese, *yan* is the word for salt and *liao* is the word for simple houses. Since salt can preserve foods from putrefaction, the word *yan* symbolizes Brother Au’s wish that his simple living can preserve society from corruption. Combined with jingtu, a Mahayana Buddhist term meaning “pure land”, the Pure Land of Yanliao epitomizes Brother Au’s ideal of a good society (Lou 2019).

Brother Au’s simple living is guided by three broad principles. First, do no harm to humans, animals, and the environment. Second, minimize your wants and desires in everyday life. Third, learn to solve problems without money. Following the last principle, the Pure Land of Yanliao is free of charge and open to the public. Anyone is welcome to stay there as long as they respect the house rules and the ethics of simple living. Visitors are asked to bring their own bowls, chopsticks, cutlery, and handkerchiefs to the house, as single-use disposable products are banned. Moreover, no consumption of meat, junk food, or alcohol is permitted during their stay (Lou 2019).

To teach by example, Brother Au has lived a minimalist life for the past 40 years. Almost everything he owns was given to him by other people. He has not purchased anything himself for over a decade. While he stayed at the Pure Land of Yanliao, he grew his own food, foraged wild vegetables, and scavenged discarded food from nearby markets. Without gas and tap water, he fetched water from a stream and cooked over an open fire. To prove to people that it was possible to live without much money and without most modern amenities, he lived without a television, washing machine, computer, air conditioner, and toilet paper. The only modern amenities that Brother Au keeps are a refrigerator, a radio, and an old Nokia phone to stay in touch with the “outside world”.

Make no mistake, Brother Au was not advocating a return to pre-modern living. He did not expect anyone to live like him in the 21st century. Instead, he tried to show the possibility of living differently, setting an example of self-cultivation and deep reflection. “I constantly ask myself what kind of person I want to become. From my head to my toes, there is not a part of my life that I have not thought through.” Brother Au asserted in his public talk at Club O. “People in the past did not have a choice. That was their way of living. But my simple living is a conscious choice. I can have running water installed in my home, but I choose not to. My simple living results from deep reflection. But it is my choice. It is not a universal truth. I'm simply showing you that it is an option,” he emphasized.

After living in Taiwan for 21 years, Brother Au thought it was time to promote his “simple living” in other Chinese-speaking societies. In 2012, Brother Au and the green people in Hong Kong were looking for a site to build a second Pure Land of Yanliao in Hong Kong. Compared to Taiwan, the cost of living and rental prices were exorbitantly high in Hong Kong. Despite this, Brother Au refused to compromise on his principle of “solving problems without money”. He insisted on finding a “landlord” who would let him use the land for free. It was a massive challenge, but he stood his ground. Eventually, the villagers of Yim Tin Tsai were moved by Brother Au’s virtuous example and agreed to let him repurpose their abandoned village into an educational “Simple Living Camp” (*gaanpok sangwut jingdei*). In the Pure Land of Yanliao, salt symbolizes the resistance against corruption. By a remarkable coincidence, the village of Yim Tin Tsai had a history closely tied to salt. It was once home to the largest salt fields in Hong Kong, with the entire village engaged in the salt trade until the global industrialization of salt production.

For nearly two years beginning in 2012, the green people dedicated their Saturdays to journeying to Yim Tin Tsai, joining hands with Brother Au to construct the Simple Living Camp. Through the heat of two intense summers and the chill of biting winters, their concerted efforts bore fruit by the close of 2014. Today, the Simple Living Camp stands as a beacon for those inspired by the promise of simple living. Open to all, it welcomes anyone eager to embark on this path toward a mindful, minimalist existence.

## *Yeah Man: The wild man in the city*

## When I met Yeah Man in 2012, he had just married but had not yet started a family. Being university graduates in our late 20s, we naturally found some common ground, an affinity that I didn’t have with more senior figures like Simon Chau and Brother Au.

Our first meeting was at his farm in Sheung Shui, the base of his green living education organization Natural Network. Yeah Man instructed me to wait for him at the PARKnSHOP supermarket at 2 PM. At a quarter past the hour, he arrived on his bike, “You’re here!” He greeted me with a big smile. “Come this way!”

The path to the farm was narrow and winding. Walking alongside his bike, Yeah Man paused whenever we came across incoming cyclists or pedestrians. It quickly became apparent that Yeah Man didn’t just stop to give way. Every time when there are villagers coming towards us, he stopped to have a chat with them.

“Have you had lunch?”

“Going out to buy food? What are you eating for tonight?”

“Did you just move in? Haven’t seen you before. Where do you live?”

To me, his greetings seemed somewhat forced, even artificial. Yeah Man greeted them as if they were old friends. In contrast, the villagers seemed aloof. Their curt smiles and hasty strides all indicated that they were not in the mood for conversation, at least not then. I was taken aback by their “cold” demeanor compared to Yeah Man’s “warmth”. In retrospect, coldness might not be an accurate descriptor. After all, most people in Hong Kong would not initiate conversations with their neighbors and typically keep to themselves. For some, Yeah Man’s approach might even come across as a little intrusive.

The way Yeah Man greeted his fellow villagers reflected the ideal many green people held about rural living. As I will elaborate in Chapter 5, in contrast to urban living, they envisioned the rural as a place of warmth between people (*jan cing mei)* and harmony between with nature. Regardless of whether this was the reality in his own village, Yeah Man lived as though it was!

Yeah Man decided to leave city life for the countryside after completing his Nature Affective Educator (NAE) training in 2003, when he was just 20. The concept of Nature Affective Education, or *cing ji zijin gaaujuk* in Chinese, was introduced in a book series called *Sharing Nature with Children*. The series, written by the American nature educator Joseph Bharat Cornell in the early 1970s, was designed to promote outdoor learning. In Hong Kong, the NAE educational program was administrated by the Gaia Association through an annual initiative called Earth Walkers (*daai dei hang ze gai waak*). “The Earth Walkers Program changed my life,” Yeah Man said, “The mentors showed me that green living and environmental protection are more than just talk. They taught me to walk the talk! By the end of the program, I was completely transformed, from a city guy to a wild man!” Yeah Man said passionately.

“Is that where your nature name?” I asked Yeah Man. “You bet! I call myself Yeah Man because I want to be a wild man in nature.”

Yeah Man’s Chinese name is Mok Ho-Kwong. In the green living circle, everyone calls him by his nature name Yeah Man. In Cantonese, the word *yeah* means wild, and Man is the English word for human.

Inspired by figures like Simon Chau and Brother Au, Yeah Man also chose to live a green and simple life. After he relocated to the countryside in his early 20s, he retained only a mobile phone and internet access from the array of modern technologies that he once used. Besides living a minimalist life, he has also mirrored farmers by growing his own food, rising before sunrise (*jat ceot ji zok*), resting after sunset (*jat jap ji sik*), and cooking over an open fire using local twigs and branches that would otherwise go to the landfill. In the green living community, wood-fired cooking *(caai fo zyu sik*) has special meanings. The practice was advocated by Yeah Man and other green living practitioners as a means of mindfulness and self-cultivation (*sau lin*)*.* As his apprentice Yin explained to me:

Wood-fired cooking teaches us to be mindful and grateful for our resources. Things are too easy in Hong Kong. You turn on the gas and you have fire. People don’t think about the source of the fire. Do you know half of Hong Kong’s energy is generated from natural gas, and the rest is from coal and nuclear power? We are so disconnected from the process of energy extraction. You may say wood-fired cooking creates black smoke and it’s a form of air pollution. But fossil fuel extraction isn’t pollution-free. Just because you don’t see it, doesn’t mean that it’s not there.

Yeah Man’s “back-to-nature” lifestyle set a compelling example for young people who aspire to live an alternative lifestyle in Hong Kong. Before his story became public, it was difficult for people his age to imagine a life in the countryside. They believed country living was suitable only for older people like Simon Chau and Brother Au. It seemed an unlikely choice for people in their 20s and 30s, especially for a young university graduate like Yeah Man, who had earned his bachelor’s degree from the most prestigious university in Hong Kong.

***Pong Yat-ming: The anti-oligarchy activist***

Two years after Pong Yat-Ming started an anti-oligarchy campaign in 2010, he wrote the opening passage I quoted at the beginning of this chapter in *The* *Anti-Oligarchy Handbook* (*jau hai m bongchan deichaa seung*), reflecting and chronicling his experience of living the change in Hong Kong. He learned that even if the campaign started out as a one-person activism, his perseverance could motivate others to join him. His example showed that Hong Kong people do not need to wait till the annual July 1 march to voice their demands, because changes can start from themselves in the everyday.

The biggest difference between Yat-ming’s green lifestyle and that of Simon Chau, Brother Au, and Yeah Man is that Yat-ming actualized most of his changes in urban settings. He boycotted all chain supermarkets, restaurants, transport services, internet providers, mobile phone companies connected to Hong Kong’s most powerful real estate oligarchs.

These include Cheung Kong Property Holdings Limited, Sun Hung Kai Properties, New World Development, Henderson Land Development. Given these four oligarchs’ dominance over almost all aspects of life in Hong Kong, boycotting them required Yat-ming to fundamentally change the way he lived. This means buying directly from producers and small shops, cycling across Hong Kong, using internet at public libraries, and opting for a village house instead of an apartment. “I boycott the businesses of the real estate oligarchs for many reasons. They are mean to their staff, ruthless towards the Hong Kong people, and exploitative towards the environment. Their monopoly forces eco-conscious Hongkongers to be complicit in their exploitation.”

In his book, Yat-ming detailed the impact of this monopoly on people’s everyday life and offered strategies to counteract it. For example, since most bus companies are owned by real estate oligarchs, he insists on cycling instead of taking the bus, even if the urban infrastructure of Hong Kong was hostile to cyclists. He then spends the money he saves from cycling to support local small businesses. Another example is broadband networks. Since they are also monopolized by the oligarchs, he discontinued his home internet service and uses internet at public libraries, community centers, or parks. As a film buff, he only frequents independent cinemas, boycotting all cinemas owned by the oligarchs.

As his one-man activism began drawing more media attention, he initiated several collective actions, most notably the “Anti-Oligarchy Christmas” and the “Anti-Oligarchy Brainstorming” events.

The first Anti-Oligarchy Christmas started in 2010 and ran every year till 2018—the year before Hong Kong went into year-long protests in 2019. The aim of the Anti-Oligarchy Christmas was to endorse and promote 33 gift ideas that were locally sourced, ethical, and environmentally friendly, thereby introducing more people to the concept of anti-oligarchy and ethical consumption.

Meanwhile, the Anti-Oligarchy Brainstorming sessions served as platforms for supporters to come together and share ideas on furthering the cause. Here, a professor of advertising proposed to use his expertise to popularize the campaign; students who majored in design offered to create a website and an app for people to find local shops; and an architect suggested a movable cabin for low-income people. These meetings offered a space for discussing non-confrontational activism: “We need to know which direction to go. Should we focus on ethical consumption? Social responsibility? Or social movements?” queried one participant. Another offered, “Traditional organizing sets goals before they act. Why don’t we do it differently this time? Why don’t we *act* before we plan?”

***Lam Lai-shan: The green mama of Hong Kong***

If my connection with Yeah Man was due to our similar age, my bond with Lam Lai-shan (Ah Shan) was due to our gender and our personality traits. Ah Shan is a warm, friendly, and candid person. Our shared pursuits and struggle with perfectionism allowed us to establish an instant rapport. She was in her 40s when I first met her. Though much younger than my mom, in many ways Ah Shan reminded me of her and her commitment to green living. I remember how much my mother hated disposable plastic products. She actively avoided using any of it long before thegovernment-imposed levies on plastic bags or banned Styrofoam. If you ask my mom why, she would be able to tell you some basic environmental facts, such as it takes a thousand years to degrade plastic bags in the landfill, or the estrogenic chemicals released by some plastics. But I know there was another, more compelling reason why she did it: She did it for us, her children.

Ah Shan, too, adopted a green lifestyle out of concern for the Earth’s health and the wellbeing of her family. This was made clear in the title of her first book, *Green Mama’s Household Intellengence,* a comprehensive guide for mothers seeking to live a greener life. From farming and cooking advice to non-toxic cleaning methods and natural insect repellents, from sustainable clothing to natural beauty, there is not a domain of the home that is not covered in the book. “I want to suggest a middle (*zung jung*) and balanced (*ping hang*) way for people who want to live a green life but don’t know how to. I want to show that money is not essential for green living, creativity is!”

Ah Shan’s balanced approach to green living may seem less “radical” compared to the practices of Simon Chau, Brother Au, Yeah Man, and Yat-ming. However, in practice, it demands considerable thought, determination, and ingenuity. Like other green living exemplars, Ah Shan does more than promote environmentally friendly lifestyles through lectures at schools, public libraries, charities, and radio broadcasts. Those who know her can attest to her living out the principles she preaches in her everyday life. Publicly, she initiated several Community Support Agriculture (CSA) groups in her community and co-created the first green calendar and green living maps in Hong Kong. Privately, she lives the life she wrote in her book, creatively repurposes and upcycles as much as she could, using cuttlefish bones, camellia seeds powder, and soap berry to clean. I always found something “new” when I visited her home: part of an old washing machine transformed into a barbecue grill (Figure 1); worn-out tennis balls transformed into chair foot covers (Figure 2), and hundreds of used socks refashioned into the padding of a meditation cushion (Figure 3). Ah Shan’s green living is characterized by a feminine aesthetic, vibrant energy, and a strong ethic of care, making it accessible and appealing to ordinary women in Hong Kong.

A potted plant next to a large pot

Description automatically generated with medium confidenceA metal basket with food on it

Description automatically generated

**Figure 1**. Part of an old washing machine transformed into a barbecue grill.

A chair with tennis balls on it

Description automatically generated

**Figure 2**. Worn-out tennis balls transformed into chair foot covers.

A brown pillow with a knot

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

**Figure 3**. Hundreds of used socks refashioned into the padding of a meditation cushion.

**Live the change**

Irrespective of their individual shades of green, there is one consensus in the green living community. That is, everyone should embody the ethos of *santai likhang* or living the change. Beneath this consensus lie two shared beliefs. The first is the acceptance that even if they cannot fully emulate the lives of the five role models, their virtuous examples should inspire them to “do as much as they can” (*zou dak gei do zou gei do*). The second belief is a commitment to personal responsibility: if one does not do their part, “they are not entitled to object” (*lin faandeoi ge zigaak dou mou*) when it comes to issues like landfill expansion. While many of the individuals highlighted in this section were initially motivated by the stories of the green living exemplars, their dedication to green living also made them role models of green living in their own right.

***Empty the plate***

On a balmy spring day in 2013, Yeah Man invited me to join him and a group of university students for lunch before going on a hike in Tai Mo Mountain. We went to a modest Chinese-style vegetarian café. As soon as we sat down, an abandoned dish on a nearby table grabbed the students’ attention. “Look!” they exclaimed, pointing at a plate of fried noodles left by customers on another table. “Let’s finish it!” one student suggested. In a matter of moments, a student took the plate over to our table. Yeah Man looked surprised, asking, “Are you sure? You don’t mind eating someone else’s leftover food?” They responded resolutely, “Of course not! We can’t let the food end up in a landfill!”

Like the monks at a monastery, Yeah Man led his students to cleanse their bowls with tea at the end of the meal, drinking the remnants of food. This “empty bowl” ritual was familiar to many in the green living community, having been practiced at Club O’s Zen Dinner, Brother Au’s Simple Living Camp, and at the Gaia School.

After the hike, I asked John, a 21-year-old STEM student at City University, about his audacity in eating strangers’ leftovers. He confessed that Yeah Man’s “McDonald’s experiment” had deeply inspired him and led him to do the same at his university canteen. “I can’t turn a blind eye to it. The food waste at my university is outrageous!” he lamented. When I expressed concern about hygiene, he shrugged it off. “If you are so concerned about hygiene, why don’t you worry about the kitchen’s hygiene? It’s also an issue, right?”

When I first arrived in Hong Kong, people consistently recommended I interview “the guy who ate people’s leftover fries at McDonald’s”. That guy is Yeah Man. His unconventional anti-food waste approach was first reported by investigative journalist Leila Chan in her book *Food Waste*:

After people left their table, Yeah Man went over and picked up their leftover fries. He ate them all. When he was done, he got up to look for other leftover fries. Within 10 minutes, he had already eaten four or five packs of fries…He was full for the day. (Chan 2011, 152).

Yeah Man said he would never have chosen to eat at McDonald’s—notorious for its destruction of tropical rainforests and over-packaging—if not to set an example. “I would never *pay* to eat there.” Yeah Man clarified. With food waste constituting nearly 40% of Hong Kong’s Municipal Solid Waste, clearing one’s plate became a top priority and moral obligation for many green advocates. While some people found Yeah Man’s approach unpalatable, others, like John, found inspiration. Indeed, one must commend Yeah Man’s ingenuity in raising awareness by consuming leftover food at a popular fast-food chain like McDonald’s.

***Garbage enzyme and waste oil soaps: Combating food waste in Hong Kong homes***

No matter how hard the green people tried to clean up their plates, there are inevitable kitchen wastes (*cyu jyu*) like fruit seeds, peels, bones, and soup scraps (*tong zaa*). Without a government-run household food waste recycling program, such waste often ends up mixed with other Municipal Solid Waste, contributing to a substantial amount of landfill gases and leachate. Moreover, the lack of outdoor space, cramped living conditions, and the absence of an effective reward & penalty system all make composting at home very challenging.

University student Matthew used to take his household food waste to the food waste processer (*cyu jyu gei*) at his university. However, when the machine broke down, he innovated a “low-tech” home-based food waste processor. He began drying fruit peels on the windowsill of his kitchen. “My parents didn’t like it. They said I was making a mess. But they let me,” he shared. To deter pests, he placed the tray on a raised shelf with the legs soaked in soapy water (Figure 5). After drying, he stored the peels in an airtight container until there were enough for composting on the hillside behind his university.

While not everyone would follow Matthew’s example to set up a drying rack in the kitchen, almost every green living partitioner has taken up the practice of fermenting garbage enzymes at home. Garbage enzyme, commonly known as *waanbou haausou* or *haausou* in Chinese, is a multi-purpose cleaning solution created by fermenting uncooked kitchen waste like fruit peels and vegetable scraps (see garbage enzyme recipe in Appendix II). This method was said to be pioneered by Rosukon Poompanvong, a forerunner in Thailand’s organic farming movement, who has been recognized by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) for her successful and environmentally-friendly agricultural methods (FAO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific 2003). In addition to her achievement in organic farming, Poompanvong is known for her promotion of garbage enzyme as a plant fertilizer, insect repellent, household cleaner, deodorizer, and air purifier in Asia. She claimed that since the process of fermentation can reduce carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, global warming will be alleviated if everyone makes garbage enzymes at home.

Although garbage enzyme is little known in the West, it is widely used in countries where municipal waste disposal causes environmental and hygiene concerns. For instance, in Malaysia, local governments encourage citizens to reduce the volume of organic waste by transforming it into garbage enzymes at home (Ho, Ling, and Manaf 2013). In Hong Kong, the trend of making domestic garbage enzymes started to emerge around 2009. Since then, nearly every green group has organized at least one workshop to teach people how to transform food waste into garbage enzymes. As a result, garbage enzymes have become a weapon against food waste and a household staple among green living advocates. In fact, I once visited a family that had amassed over a hundred tanks of garbage enzymes in their living room.

***Eco soap-making as a form of ecofeminism***

Within the green living community, it’s not just fruit peels and vegetable scraps that garner attention. Waste oil is another kitchen waste that draws particular interest from women. In Hong Kong, there is a long-standing tradition for eco-conscious women to engage in soap making. This tradition was initiated by an organization called Green Women (*luk sik neoi lau*) in Tuen Mun. This pioneering grassroots organization used soap-making to mobilize working-class housewives to participate in what they called “a women-empowering movement” and “an environmental movement that starts from the everyday” (Green Women 2006).

With a start-up fund from the government’s Environment and Conservation Fund, Green Women launched the first eco-soap factory in 2004. Instead of buying new raw materials to make soaps, Green Women collected used cooking oil (*sikjung faijau*) from cafés and restaurants in their neighborhood and transformed them into used waste oil soap (*fai jau zou*). Remarkably, each soap could be traced back to a kitchen in the community. Eco-soaps, like garbage enzymes, became the main staples in many green people’s homes. Although Green Women disbanded when the funding ended, their ideas have lived on with many green mamas in Hong Kong.

Jessica, an eco-conscious homemaker I met through Ah Shan, is one such green mama. A resourceful woman in her 40s, when Jessica and her friend Kan noticed butchers in the wet market mindlessly discarding the chicken and goose fat in the drain, they convinced the butchers to let them take the fat and turn it into chicken and goose fat soaps. “We want to turn it into something useful. Why not? People have been using waste oil to make soaps for decades, be it vegetable oil or animal fat,” Jessica said.

At first, meat vendors were dubious about the efficacy of soaps made from waste fat. However, their skepticism dissipated after using the soaps themselves and realizing the positive environmental impact of such recycling. “By recycling waste oil, we not only prevent blocked drains but most importantly, the more people use waste oil soaps, the less likely they would turn to toxic cleaning solutions. That’s a big help for our environment,” The women soap makers explained to me in a group discussion. They were also proud of their creative use of plastic waste, such as tofu containers, chocolate boxes, and milk cartons, as soap molds.

While waste oil soaps are typically used for household cleaning, breast milk soaps are specially made for bathing infants. During my time in Hong Kong, breast milk soaps were very popular among mothers who practiced green living. Since women in Hong Kong are only eligible for 10 weeks of paid maternity leave, many working mothers resort to breast pumps and store their breast milk in the freezer. As the stash of unconsumed breast milk piles up, some mothers would give their extra milk to soap makers.

In Hong Kong, soap-making serves both as an environmental initiative and a gender-specific craft that redefines societal notions about women. Bella Ip, the founder of the social enterprise So Soap, praised soap making as a family-friendly occupation that allows mothers to balance work and childcare. “Soap-making is a great job for mothers because they can look after their children at home while developing their soap-making business. People always say children are the future pillars of our society, but children in Hong Kong are constantly deprived of quality time with their mothers. Why must women work away from home to be seen as equals to men? Why must women follow men’s career trajectories? Forcing women to be more like men is not an advance of feminism” Bella insisted.

Two decades after Green Women ventured into soap making, the popularity of hand-made eco-soaps continues to grow in Hong Kong. Although Green Women openly identified their movement with ecofeminism, they did not consider themselves victims of patriarchy. Rather, they viewed domesticity as a domain of change and housewives as gatekeepers of their families’ health and well-being. Soap-making has opened opportunities for women who might otherwise be excluded from the workforce or the environmental movement. It enables them to earn extra cash while taking care of their young children at home—an informal economic practice common to many households before Hong Kong restructured its economy in the 1980s (Lou 2017).

***The challenge of zero-waste living***

The journey towards a zero-waste life isn't just about navigating a world where many products are excessively packaged; it also requires infinite patience and tenacity. In December 2012, Yeah Man invited 13 green people—including me—to participate in a one-day zero-packaging challenge. The aim was to raise awareness about overpackaging and familiarize the participants with a more sustainable way to shop. At that time, the so-called naked or zero-waste grocery stores had not yet gained popularity in the West, let alone in Hong Kong. Nonetheless, it was possible to purchase food without packaging from the wet market and traditional Chinese groceries. Since zero-waste shopping resonated with Yat-ming’s call for boycotting supermarket chains in favor of local small shops, many considered zero-waste shopping a two-pronged approach to environmentalism.

Before the challenge, Yeah Man divided us into teams, each led by someone who had participated in the previous year’s challenge. After a brief discussion of what to buy, we made our way to the Sheung Shui wet market. My team’s mission was to purchase various items such as eggs, a range of tofu products, assorted vegetables, rice, and noodles without generating any packaging waste.

The experience was eye-opening, as before that day, I didn’t know package-free shopping was still possible in Hong Kong. I was impressed by my teammates’ inventiveness and adaptability. For example, at the rice shop, one team member repurposed an old pillowcase that he brought to carry rice. In lieu of an egg carton, we asked the vendor to spare us some cardboard to cushion the eggs in our glass container - a method that resulted in zero broken eggs!

The zero-waste challenge didn’t conclude with the day’s event. Many of my green friends strove to live a zero-waste life daily. Hoi Kei, for example, had been bringing her own containers to shops and restaurants.

She showed me a picture of a takeaway breakfast set in her own containers and a picture of the same set served in disposable containers. “My colleague and I bought the same breakfast set. Can you believe one set can generate eleven pieces of waste if I hadn’t brought my own containers?” She then started to enumerate, one by one, all the disposable items used for the breakfast set: “a polystyrene foam box, a plastic spoon, a plastic fork, a plastic knife, a paper cup, a plastic cup lid, a plastic straw, a plastic box for the sauce, toothpicks, tissue paper, plastic bags. A set like this would generate eleven pieces of rubbish! For god’s sake!” She said with agitation.

As Hoi Kei continued to show me other zero-waste photos with excitement, I couldn’t help but wonder what she would do if she forgot to bring her utensils. She replied, “I’d rather not eat. I lose my appetite thinking about the waste I would produce.”

That is why the green people insisted that refusal is the best thing one could do for the environment. Recycling, they argued, should be the last resort. I vividly recall one time when Maggie and I were in a restaurant. As soon as we were seated, she promptly returned the paper napkins to the waiter. “Thank you but I have my own handkerchief,” she said to the waiter before explaining to me, “Most of these napkins are discarded unused after each meal. It’s unacceptable.” Similarly, Shek Zai would hand back any unused sachets of salt, pepper, and sugar to the café as soon as he sat down. Starfish, the headmaster of the Gaia School, took the principle of refusal a step further. “I enjoy coffee with sugar, but I refuse to use those pre-packaged sugar sachets. That's why I carry a little jar of sugar with me everywhere. I don’t want my preference to have a negative impact on others’ lives.”

However, when there is waste, these individuals did their best to recycle as much as possible. Siu-ma, a bank cashier and respected figure within the green living community, was known for his rigorous art of sorting. He was the one behind the Eco Park tour I mentioned in the previous chapter. Unlike most recyclers who simply toss a magazine into the paper recycling bin, Siu-ma would meticulously peel off the plastic film from the magazine cover first. He believed that by separating the unrecyclable plastic coating from the recyclable paper, he would significantly increase the amount of paper that could be recycled. He applied the same technique to other plastic-mixed paper products, such as window envelopes. As such, his rucksack was always filled with what others might deem as “trash”. Every time I saw him, he would say, “Loretta, help me separate some films from the magazine covers.” At every green living event he attended, he would demonstrate to new acquaintances the process of removing the plastic film from a magazine cover, encouraging them to incorporate this “peeling” practice into their recycling routines. This has led some peers to jest that Siu-ma’s recycling zeal matches Simon Chau’s raw vegan radicalism.

**From green-tech to green-technics: The significance of green living**

Technological advancement is widely seen as the most promising solution to combating climate change. Some even view it as a panacea for all environmental problems in the Anthropocene. When we talk about green technologies, images of gleaming solar panels and rhythmic wind farms often come to mind. We tend to think of green technologies as high-tech gadgets or cutting-edge infrastructures, built on advanced scientific knowledge and engineering sophistication. In contrast, the techniques and technologies associated with green living are often dismissed as low-tech, simplistic, and ineffective (Gibson et al. 2013).

This perspective has led many, including numerous environmentalists, to belittle green living as insignificant. However, scholars from the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS) argue otherwise. In her influential work on gender and technology in imperial China, Francesca Bray challenges this perspective:

If we assume that real technology is inseparable from experimental science, if we judge technical efficiency by mechanical sophistication, by the productivity of labor and of capital, by the scale of operation and the reduced number of human agent on the assembly line or in the field, if we think growth and change are more advanced than stability or continuity, it is because that is how our modern Western world was made’ (Bray 1997, 12).

However, not all worlds are made the same way. The green people were striving to create a different world—one constructed around ethics of care and noncapitalist values and aspirations (Bray 1997, 12). This process involves not just technologies in their “crude material sense” (Bray, 1997, 2), but also various social, ideological, and ethical techniques of the self (Foucault 1988). Whether it was sorting garbage by hand, saving water with mindfulness, eating others’ leftover food in restaurants, or repurposing a broken washing machine into a grill, the significance of these green living practices rests not in their productivity, effectiveness, and efficiency by capitalist or the United Nation’s standards. The true significance of green living is that it demonstrates “viable alternatives to modern social and political arrangements” (Escobar 2009, 71-72) through what I call the “green-technics”. In contrast to conventional green technologies, green-technics refer to embodied practices and personal techniques that cultivate environmental subjects and moral examples.

By uncovering green-technics that are often deemed inferior by the “ecocracy” (Escobar 1995, 193), my goal is not to downplay the role of technologies in our fight against climate change, but to present a perspective of technology that prompts us to rethink what technology is and how it should be studied. In doing so, I hope the concept of green-technics can challenge established narratives and destabilize modernist assumptions of green civilization (Bray 2008), while inspring new ways to evaluate environmental endeavors that fall outside the regime of the science.

***3. Healing Nature***

“I thought I was recycling for Tzu Chi, but it is Tzu Chi that is recycling me.”

Cheung *sihing*, a volunteer at Tzu Chi Recycling Point, Hong Kong

For more than a decade, the green group Club O hosted a weekly public event called “healing night” at its base in Mong Kok. The event typically consisted of a healing lesson delivered by an invited speaker, followed by a collective session resembling what we may call “group therapy”, where participants were encouraged to share their pain, experience, and wisdom with others. I recall in one of the healing lessons when Pierre, a spiritual environmentalist and regular speaker for Club O, reminisced about his time in a Scottish eco-village. “It was like an adventure of consciousness,” he said. “I learned in the eco-village that the longest journey for a human being is from the head to the heart. Green living serves as a compass for that journey.”

Here, the “head” is a metaphor for rationality. In capitalist reasoning, this means hard facts and economic actions based on “dispassionate cost-benefit calculation” (Anderson 1996, vii). In contrast, the “heart” signifies spirituality and the “deep emotional side of humanity” (Anderson 1996, viii). After living in the eco-village for 8 years, Pierre was convinced that green living is what it takes to lead people to their hearts. Once they get there, he said, their emotional and spiritual awakenings would guide them to relate to nature, society, and themselves in new ways that hard facts and rationality can’t offer.

Since the 1990s, proponents of spiritual ecology have argued that secular approaches alone are insufficient to resolve the environmental crisis, but a quiet revolution of spiritual ecology could profoundly transform how individuals and societies relate to nature, potentially turning the tide for the better (Tucker & Grim 1993; Tucker & Grim 2001; Gottlieb 2006; Taylor 2007; Sponsel 2012). This concept is explored in depth in Leslie Sponsel’s influential book, *Spiritual Ecology*:

Many scientific, technological, governmental, legal, and other secular fixes for some environmental problems have been successful, yet the ecocrisis…persists.…Advocates of spiritual ecology consider the ecocrisis to result from human alienation from nature combined with the disenchantment, objectification, and commodification of nature. Increasingly nature is considered as simply a warehouse of resources to be extracted in order to not only meet basic human needs, but also to…satisfy the apparently unlimited greed for profit of rampant predatory capitalism” (Sponsel 2012, 26).

In Hong Kong, spiritual ecology was primarily promoted by three key figures: Simon Chau, a pioneering environmentalist, interfaith new ager, and founder of Club O; Brother Au, a proponent of simple living and a Catholic; and Tzu Chi, a Buddhist charity established by Master Cheng Yen in Taiwan. Among these, the Buddhist concept of “spiritual environmentalism” (*xinling huanbao*) is perhaps the most prominent example of spiritual ecology in Chinese societies. The term was first coined by Taiwanese Buddhist monk Master Sheng-yen (*Sheng Yan fashi*), founder of the renowned Dharma Drum Mountain, who espouses that when one’s *xinling* (heart/mind/spirituality) or inner environment is purified (*zing faa*), the external environment will follow suit (Clippard 2012). Yet if the self or the heart remains unchanged, Dharma Master Sheng-yen cautioned, environmental protection becomes mere tokenism.

This chapter tells the stories of individuals whose lives were transformed through the practice of green living. It investigates two modes of self-transformation found within the green living circle in Hong Kong. The first mode of self-transformation occurs when individuals consciously respond to green groups and the green living exemplars’ appeals to cultivate themselves for environmental protection. By contrast, the second mode of self-transformation emerges inadvertently as individuals develop an interest in green living during special life events or life-course transitions. The title of this chapter, “Healing Nature”, is a pun to describe these two modes of self-transformation. When “healing” is a verb, it indicates humanity’s efforts to rectify the harm done to the environment. When “healing” is an adjective, it is nature—or more precisely, the practice of green living—that has the power to heal people. The perceived reciprocity and interdependence between one’s spiritual and physical environments, coupled with the shift in focus from external problems to the inner self, are what set the green living movement apart from earlier environmental movements and the more recent political protests that entrust the possibilities of changes to largely external factors.

**Cultivating self for the environment**

The first mode of self-transformation occurs when individuals consciously respond to green groups’ appeals to cultivate themselves for the environment. More formally known as the Green Living Education Foundation, Club O is one of the earliest green groups that advocates spiritual ecology in Hong Kong. Founded by Simon Chau in 2004, the mission of Club O is to encourage Hongkongers to “conduct their life according to the laws of nature” (*seon jing zi jin*). Drawing heavily on New Age Spirituality, Buddhism, Daoism, interfaith dialogues, and various *yangsheng* traditions[[9]](#footnote-9) (i.e., traditional Chinese medicine, Ayurveda, Reiki), Club O sees ecological wellbeing as a manifestation of one’s bodily and spiritual wellbeing and vice versa. Thus since its conception, the green group has been running events designed to “heal people’s hearts” (*ji sam*), which it regards as the first step towards healing nature. These activities run weekly, most of them are free-of-charge and open to the public. They included public lectures on green living, mindful eating, *qigong*, yoga, meditation (*zing sam*), Reiki, and healing lessons (*liu jyu fo*).

Although green living in Hong Kong may look like folk religious revivalism with a flair of the New Age movement, as Adam Chau cautions, many of these practices only have a traditional outlook, but they “carry meanings different from those of the past, and therefore we should not mistake the return of these practices as a revival of unadulterated tradition” (Chau 2011:5-6). In his view, the revival of traditional practices is not continuation of past traditions, but rather an “invention of tradition” (Chau 2011:6). These “traditional” practices are “different cultural inventions slowly cohered into a “tradition” or “traditions” …over hundreds of years, but the constituent parts can always be broken apart, recombined, and reformulated into new traditions…hence the simultaneous novelty and traditionalism of new religious movements” (Chau 2011:6).

One of the examples of such reinvention of tradition was Club O’s Zen meal (*sim sik*). This popular event was an adaptation of Ōryōki, a Japanese form of meditative eating that is widely practiced in Zen Monasteries. The event was first set up by the Hong Kong Vegetarian Society (the predecessor of Club O, also founded by Simon Chau) in 1996 to introduce Hongkongers to veganism and mindfulness. Since 2004, Club O took over the organization and has been serving free meals to the public three times a week for more than a decade now.

Before Club O's renovation in 2018, the Zen meal took place in a cozy room, decorated with curtains hand-dyed in vibrant yellow, pastel green, and duck egg blue hues. Warm and delightful, the style and the colors of the curtains radiated an innocence that resembled children’s drawings. Surrounded by scented candles, the room was permeated with a lovely fragrance of bergamot essential oil.

It was a Saturday afternoon. By the time I arrived, there were already 39 people in the room, almost all of them middle-aged women. Prior to the meal, participants were asked to prepare their minds for the food through a meditation exercise called *zing sam,* literally “calming the heart”. “Breathe in peace—breathe out smile”. The facilitator instructed. In Club O, this meditation process was vividly described as *boktung tindei sin*, a very colloquial way of saying *tianren heyi* (nature and human are one) in Hong Kong Cantonese. In addition to preparing the mind for the meal, one should also prepare the body with a life-enhancing Daoist *yangsheng* practice, which involved sitting in a good posture and rinsing one’s mouth with their own saliva (*zeon jik*).

Bong—Bong.

Following an enchanting sound of a Tibetan singing bowl, people slowly opened their eyes and listened to the day’s teaching: “You don’t need to be a hermit in the mountain to cultivate yourself. Self-cultivation is something that we can all do in our daily life, here and now.”

After all the rituals were performed, the facilitator announced that lunch could now be served. Reusable bowls and chopsticks were slowly passed to the diners, waiting for the volunteers to fill their bowls with vegan food. The first dish was a bowl of Cantonese clear soup stewed with carrot, *chieh qua*, and cashew nuts. The second dish was a lettuce and pineapple salad served with a bowl of red rice with *si gwaa*, Chinese black fungus, and crystal noodles.

Since talking was not allowed, diners thanked the volunteers for serving them food with a gentle bow from their seats. Meanwhile, the facilitator directed us to place our hands on top of the chopsticks and the bowls to show our respect to food and nature. She said: “Eating is not like adding fuel to a car. Every time we eat, we take in the food’s energy (*qi*). Its energy nurtures our well-being—body, mind, spirituality (*san sam ling*). When you are happy and healthy, you’re green. Now let us send our blessings and gratitude to this bowl of food that will soon become us.”

Soon the room was filled with a melodious sound of chopsticks hitting bowls. People finally began to eat. At the end of the meal, there was a tea ritual known as “leave no trace”, during which diners cleaned their bowls with tea before drinking it, just as they do in Zen monasteries. In Hong Kong, the U.S.-originated principle of “leave no trace”[[10]](#footnote-10) was applied by the green people not only during outings in the country park, but also at their dining tables.

When the Japanese Ōryōki was adapted into the Zen meal by the Hong Kong Vegetarian Society in 1996, it aimed to introduce Hongkongers to the connections between veganism, spiritual ecology, and ideas of self-cultivation. After every Zen meal, the facilitator would introduce the diners to the chef of the day. Terry, our chef that day, was a long-term volunteer of Club O’s kitchen. As he explained the health benefits of each ingredient, Terry encouraged us to eat local and seasonal (*dong zou*) food whenever possible. “You get the best flavour from seasonal food. Eating seasonally is also good for the environment because farmers don’t need to use as much pesticides. The energies of the vegetables are at their peak when they are in season!”

If Club O is the “pure land in a frenetic city” (*naau si zung dik zingtou*), as many of my interlocutors referred to it, Brother Au’s Simple Living Camp in Sai Kung is where the green people considered as the pure land within nature. When my green friend Wai-ling visited the camp in Yim Tin Tsai, she was struck by how thoughtful Brother Au’s self-cultivation practices were: “I thought I was already quite green, but after the visit, I realized that there is still room for improvement in my green living when compared to Brother Au.” Take water conservation as an example. While it’s common for people to save water by taking shorter showers or reusing grey water, Brother Au took an extra step to ensure every drop was utilized. To demonstrate how little water people actually require when they turn on the tap, he invented “water meditation” (*seoi sauhang*), a technique that uses a repurposed water bottle to save water. Without a tap water system in the Simple Living Camp, Brother Au set up his own “running water” device with plastic water bottles collected from waste bins. By puncturing two small holes at the bottom of the bottles, he enabled water to trickle through. The slim streams served as a stark contrast to the flowing water in modern bathrooms, prompting people to reconsider their wasteful habits in their daily life (Lou 2019).

Besides “water meditation”, another self-cultivation practice that Brother Au introduced was “dining table meditation” (*caan coek sauhang*), a technique he invented to keep the dining table spotlessly clean so that there is no need for cleaning after every use. To achieve this, Brother Au suggested people take “preventive measures” to avoid making the table dirty in the first place. “We should pour the sauce as carefully as we pour dangerous chemicals in the laboratory. To avoid spills and drips when pouring, we can use a chopstick to guide the liquid in the desired direction,” the former chemist advised. In Brother Au’s view, doing environmental protection at the dining table is a more advanced form of environmentalism. The practice isn’t about cleanliness per se, but rather enhancing people’s awareness of wastefulness. In the philosophy of simple living, every drop matters.

Organizations such as Club O, the Simple Living Camp, and Tzu Chi were seen by many green people as a *sauhang doucoeng*, a Buddhist concept referring to a place where people can cultivate themselves. Regardless of where one chooses to cultivate themselves for the environment and society, the key is to have deep introspection (*noi sing*) of one’s actions. As one member of Club O told me: “Spiritual awakening demands deep introspection. We must look inwards and ask ourselves, what have I done to the Earth? Why did I do it? How can I rectify my wrongdoings? You do this by cultivating yourself (*sau zi gei*). When your heart is green, you won’t need rules to tell you what’s green and what’s not. You’ll naturally do what’s right for the environment.”

Helen, a 27-year-old Club O volunteer, went even further. Recently having transitioned from Christianity to Buddhism after attending a few of Club O’s interfaith lectures, Helen said the spiritual component of green living had renewed her understanding of humanity’s relationship with nature. “The kind of green living that Club O promotes goes beyond recycling. If you’re recycling, that’s excellent. But that’s just surface level. Green living is much deeper than that. Ultimately, green living is about spirituality (*sam ling*). It’s about whether you think humans stand atop the pyramid, or we’re just one of the many species sharing the Earth.” Her conversion to Buddhism also profoundly reshaped her perception of environmentalism. “Have you heard of the Buddhist saying *sing* *zyu waai hung*?” Helen asked me. *Sing* *zyu waai hung* is the Chinese translation of the four phrases of Buddhist temporal cosmology. In Sanskrit, they are Vivartakalpa, Vivartasth*ā*yikalpa, Samvartakalpa, Samvartasth*ā*yikalpa, meaning the beginning of things (*sing*), temporal stability (*zyu*), deterioration (*waai*), and the eventual emptiness (*hung*). “That is the law of the universe (*jyu zau dik kwai leot*). We can’t escape it. Sooner or later the Earth is going to die (*mit mong*). Environmental protection (*waanbao*) just slows down the process.”

Helen’s view is not completely unreasonable, especially when considered from an environmental science standpoint: nature has been dealing with some significant environmental changes for at least 3.5 billion years. We, the *Homo sapiens sapiens,* have only been around for 200,000 to 300,000 years. And even though solar energy is considered a perpetual resource because its supply is expected to last at least 6 billion years, the sun will eventually complete its life cycle (Miller and Spoolman 2012). Still, I was astonished by her apocalyptic view. If we accept such a “pessimistic” outlook for the Earth, why bother with green living? Mr. Chiu, a Club O founding member, was quick to point out my “blind spot”. “Green living isn’t about saving the Earth out there. It is about changing the ‘earth’ within yourself (*zi gei dik tou joeng*). We may not be able to change the world, but we can transform ourselves. Focusing on the external is a waste of energy. The ultimate solution to the world’s problems is to deal with your own problems first.” Helen concurred, “I can’t agree more. It’s not the Earth that needs our saving. It’s us!”

**Recycling self in a Buddhist charity**

Besides Club O and the Simple Living Camp, the Buddhist Organization Tzu Chi is another key advocate for spiritual ecology in Hong Kong. As one of the most representative organizations of spiritual environmentalism in the Chinese-speaking world (Clippard 2012:335), Tzu Chi dedicates a significant amount of their resources towards environmental protection, recycling, and upcycling. In 2009, the Hong Kong branch of Tzu Chi inaugurated its first Environmental Education Station, an effort to replicate Taiwan’s successful recycling scheme. Thanks to the tireless work of its volunteers, by 2013, Tzu Chi had established over 20 recycling points and three Environmental Education Stations across Hong Kong. “Master Cheng-yen (*Zheng Yan fashi*) teaches us to save the Earth with our hands. But we’re not only doing it for our Master, we’re also doing it because it’s our responsibility. We are all part of this Earth. It’s our duty to leave a clean planet for future generations.”

Overhearing our conversation, Cheung *sihing* chimed in: “We also want to mitigate disasters. Buddhism believes that disasters are man-made (*jan wai*). For example, climate change stems from our greed and selfishness. Our overconsumption is a manifestation of our lack of gratitude (*bat sik fuk*).” “Precisely,” Dai *sihing* interjected. “We've been polluting the Earth since our birth, but we have the power to rectify past wrongs and heal nature.”

How?

“It’s very simple. You can do it in your everyday life,” responded Dai *sihing*. “Some green groups like to hire people like you. They want highly educated people to help them write proposals and lobby the government. In my opinion, this approach alienates the grassroots (*gei cang*). It deters the old folks (*gunggung popo*) from participating in environmental protection. Many *gunggung popo* have told me, ‘Aiya, I can’t do it! I have little education (*duk dak syu siu*)’. But look at the women over there?[[11]](#footnote-11) They might not have the same level of education as you, but we still offer them an opportunity to contribute. We want them to realize: ‘Although I am a housewife, there’s something I can do to heal the Earth. I can collect bottles and bring them to Tzu Chi for recycling!’ Trust me, everyone can contribute. It’s more practical and effective than just writing about it!”

Like Club O, Tzu Chi is largely run by volunteers like Dai *sihing* and Cheung *sihing*. However, a notable difference is that volunteers in Tzu Chi are referred to as *zi gung* instead of the more common phrase *ji gung*. “The bottom compound of the Chinese character *ji* is the word meaning ‘ego’, whereas the bottom compound of the character *zi* is the ‘heart’,” explained Dai *sihing* as he sketched out the two Chinese characters on a piece of paper, “So, you see, our volunteers dedicate their hearts to their work, but they're not just serving us. Most of them feel they gain something from this process as well.”

Cheung *sihing* was one of those people whose life was transformed through sorting garbage at Tzu Chi. With a lively, personable demeanor, it was hard to believe this man standing before me was once a member of a triad. “You wouldn’t believe it! I used to be a drug dealer and a loan shark,” he confessed. To me, Cheung *sihing* looked nothing like the stereotypical thug you see in classic Hong Kong gangster movies. There were no dragon tattoos adorning his arms and his hair was not dyed blonde. He simply looked like an ordinary man in his early 60s.

When Cheung *sihing* met his wife—“the soulmate of his life”— he decided to leave his past life behind for her. “My wife is an ordinary woman wanting an ordinary life. She didn’t want me involved in the triad, so I left.” After they married, the couple ran a small family business. Although everything seemed fine on the surface, they felt deeply troubled inside. Haunted by their past, his wife developed severe phobias, afraid of ghosts, spirits, hospitals, and funeral homes—anything that had to do with death. When his father lay on his deathbed in the hospital, his wife couldn’t bear to be near the bed. That was their wake-up call. They knew they needed help.

One day, the couple chanced upon a television speech from Master Cheng-yen, the founder of Tzu Chi, and decided to seek solace from the Buddhist organization. The first task Tzu Chi assigned them was to volunteer at hospitals. Considering Mrs. Cheung’s phobia, this seemed an impossible task at first, but she eventually came to terms with life’s impermanent and realized that fear wouldn’t change this reality.

Seeing his wife’s transformation greatly bolstered Cheung *sihing*’s faith in Buddhism. So, as soon as he retired, he dedicated all his time to volunteering at Tzu Chi, working mostly on recycling.

Compared to the volunteering at the hospitals, Cheung *sihing* believed that it was his work in environmental protection that truly transformed him. While volunteering at the hospital, he said he still had an “I am helping you” mentality. But the work of environmental protection humbled him, making him realize that it was the other way round. “Environmental protection is a method (*faat mun*) that gives me an opportunity to cultivate myself (*sau zigei*).” Cheung *sihing* said with gratitude. “I used to be very arrogant. When I first started picking up trash on the street, I was fearful of running into friends and families. I didn’t know what they would think of me. I worried they would assume I was either crazy or destitute. The recycling work at Tzu Chi taught me to let go of my ego. I thought I was recycling for Tzu Chi, but it is Tzu Chi that was recycling me.”

**Healing through green living**

***Life transition***

The second mode of self-transformation transpires as a by-product of practicing green living during a significant life event or a life-course transition. Life adversities and life transitions are critical junctures that force people to pause and reassess their current lifestyles. Indeed, I encountered many people who had developed an interest in green living not because of the starving polar bears or the melting Arctic Sea, but because they were undergoing a difficult life event or a transition in life.

The *si nai* (a colloquial term for “housewives” in Hong Kong) in northeast New Territories were some of the first people to draw my attention to the therapeutic power of green living. Like their counterparts in Taiwan’s Homemakers Union, the *si nai* in Hong Kong also felt empowered by green living (Lu 1991), but for reasons other than those emphasized in previous studies. For example, Huang and Weller suggested that gender-based organizations can “offer women a world of their own, where they can take on organizing roles…without leaving the family” (Huang and Weller 1998, 387). Meanwhile, Lu’s research showed that women in the Homemakers Union had more influence at home as they instilled new knowledge of the environment into their families (Lu, 1991:38).

However, most of the *si nai* I talked to said that wasn’t what drew them to green living in the first place. Emily was the owner of a small organic grocery shop in the New Territories. She said she got into green living because she needed sustenance (*gei tok*) and a means to reconnect to society after the birth of her son. “We stay at home to support our family so our men can go to work without worries. But men look down on us! The whole society looks down on us!” She said indignantly.

“Aye, people think we’re just a bunch of unproductive (*bat si saangcaan*) *si nai*. It’s unfair!” Emily’s friend Ah-Gyun protested. “We are using our everyday knowledge and wisdom to promote a way of living that’s good for both the Earth and families.”

After the birth of their first child, both Emily and Ah-Gyun became enthusiastic about green living, which offered them an opportunity to shed the mildly derogatory label of *si nai* and don the mantle of a green woman activist. But they said that was not their main motivation for going green. The main motivation, Emily said, was to use green living to “heal (*zi liu*)” herself.

“To heal yourself? In what ways?” I asked her and several other *si nai* at the vegetable collection place for their Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) group.

“Do you know music therapy or garden therapy? It’s like that. You lose your sense of self (*mou zo zi gei*) when you became a mother.”

“I agree.” Another *si nai* chimed in. “Parenting is very frustrating.”

After the CSA crowd dispersed, Emily confided in me about her struggle over the years as a mother and a housewife:

Do you know why some women harm their babies? I understand why. Because they can’t cope. Hong Kong’s apartments are small and claustrophobic. If you are at home with your baby all the time, it’s very easy to become depression. You asked why I like green living. Because I think people need to go out of their apartments, to see nature, and to interact with others. People need to stay in touch with society. When your entire focus is domestic, you can become very narrow-minded. You’d nag your husband. You’d complain. ‘Why don’t you do this? Why don’t you do that?’ Men don’t know how difficult it is to manage a home. They don’t get it. So how dare they…how dare they call me a nagger!

Mothering is not like a job. You can’t just quit if you don’t like it. You can leave your husband, but you can’t leave your son! You can’t leave the role (*gong wai*) of a housewife (*zyu fu*).

In addition to childbirth, career transition was another impetus for people going green. 55-year-old Mary, married but without children, spent most of her after-work hours advocating for green living because she regretted how she had chosen to live her life in her early 40s. “I was a *neoi koeng jan* (successful career woman) and I worked from 9 am to 9 pm for 10 years. I devoted myself—100 percent—to that job. Then the company went bankrupt, and I was laid off. I squandered 10 years of my life for this ruthless company. What did I gain? What contributions did I make to society? Do I want to live the next decade the same way?”

Her redundancy was a wake-up call. Since 2002, Mary had tried to make up for her losses by joining many green groups and doing what she believed was more meaningful for society.

In contrast, Esther’s career had been so successful that she could afford early retirement at the age of 45. Yet her success came with a cost. Looking back, she regretted sacrificing precious family time and life dreams for her entertainment business. “I was very extreme. When I travelled for work, I had an agreement with my husband: neither of us would call the other. The arrangement allowed me to concentrate on my work and temporarily forget that I am a married woman with family responsibilities.”

The turning point occurred on her son’s first birthday. “I used to travel frequently for work. On his one-year-old birthday, I was in New York, trying to catch the flight to San Francisco to then transit to Hong Kong. There was no direct flight from New York to Hong Kong back then. I got the time wrong because of the East and West coast time difference, so I had to run from Gate 1 to Gate 99. I arrived home at 11:30 pm. My son’s four grandparents were all waiting for me. We blew the candles, sang the birthday song, and took a family picture. All these happened within five minutes. Then everyone left as it was nearly midnight. I felt awful.”

Since the birthday party, Esther yearned to return to her slower and greener root. “I grew up in a village in the New Territories. You can say I was raised in nature. I wasn’t afraid of bees and I ran around barefoot. But I left my roots to pursue a materially richer life.” So as soon as she paid off her mortgage, she reduced her working hours and devoted most of her time to green living. She even leveraged her network and influence to support several green enterprises. “My motivation is very simple. It’s not entirely altruistic. I protect the environment because I’m also part of it. If I can convince five people to use a non-toxic soap bar instead of a bottle of chemical shower gel, I save five plastic bottles of shower gel from polluting the Earth. At the end of the day, we all breathe the same air.”

***Illness of the heart***

Similarly, green living offers consolation to people in the face of illness and disease. From minor ailments like back pain and eczema to more serious conditions such as cancer and Parkinson’s Disease, some people had turned to green living following a physical or emotional illness. As one cancer survivor recounted: “People in Club O said vegetarianism might be good for my health, so I gave it a try. Only then did I come to understand the cruelty and unsustainable nature of industrialized meat production.”

Likewise, Joanne had a revelation about green living when she was hospitalized a few years ago. “When I was lying on the hospital bed, I cried. I saw the damage I had done to my body and soul. When God gave me life, He gave me perfect health. Just as when He created Earth, everything was in harmony.” Following her recovery, Joanne decided to advocate for vegetarianism and green living in Hong Kong's Catholic churches, following the example of a respected priest.

While Club O is known for its commitment to green living education, many of its events and activities focus on human health and wellbeing. From an outsider’s perspective, Club O may appear to prioritize health over the environment. However, this is a conscious strategy, as its founder Simon Chau was well aware that “abstract appeals to the well-being of ‘nature’ are not likely to work” in Chinese societies[[12]](#footnote-12) (Weller and Bol 1998, 337). Thus, Chau uses health and Asian philosophy as entry points to introduce people to green living (Choy 2011: 9). This approach is rooted in the understanding that failure to acknowledge that human wellbeing is at least as important as ecological wellbeing was a major reason why international green groups struggled to mobilize Hong Kong people to participate in their environmental movement (Lou 2022: 115).

Yet, the focus on health isn’t just a tactic to gain more members or publicize green living. The founding members of Club O genuinely believed that personal wellbeing and ecological wellbeing are interdependent. As they clearly stated in Club O’s mission statement in 2004:

The Green Living Education Foundation aspires and commits itself to the education of green living—conducting one’s life according to the laws of Nature—in Hong Kong. In specific terms, that entails pro-active as well as remedial efforts to encourage, ensure and empower Hongkongers to care about and practice the following: Micro-wellbeing (personal health concerns) and Macro-wellbeing (ecological concerns).

Almost a decade before the public health professionals in the West brought attention to the neologism of “planetary health” (Horton et al. 2014), some environmentalists in Hong Kong had already developed an ecological view of interdependent wellbeing, drawing inspirations from traditional Chinese medical and philosophical knowledge, namely the ideal of *tianren heyi* (the unity of people and nature) (Weller 2006, 24) and the view that human body is “intricately intertwined with its environment” (Hsu, 1999:82). They held that “body and environment cannot be dealt with as separate entities” (Hsu, 1999:82). To heal nature, people must first heal themselves.

This principle ran through all of Club O’s educational activities, especially the “healing night”. As I noted earlier, the weekly healing night consisted of a healing lesson and a “group therapy”, where participants were encouraged to share their thoughts and experience. The conversation was usually light-hearted, as people tended not to share private details in such an open environment. But one evening, a long-term member of Club O brought a woman named Jane to the group. Jane had been diagnosed with breast cancer the month before and was about to start her chemotherapy. “I’ve been asking myself, why me?” She choked as she spoke. Words of sympathy and encouragement poured in. Some people tried to console her by saying that nothing is permanent, including her suffering. Others encouraged her to examine her *sam beng*, which they said were the real culprit of her cancer.

In Chinese societies, negative emotions such as anxiety, depression, repressed anger, guilt, and regret are thought to contribute to cancer and other serious physical illnesses (Lora-Wainwright, 2013:119). People refer to such emotional sickness as *sam beng*, literally “illness of the heart”. Note that traditional Chinese medicine “does not presuppose a dualistic separation of mind and body”, nor does it typically “make a categorical distinction between psychological and physical disorders” (Zhang 2007, 6). The etymology of the word *xin/sam* describes a heart that is both visceral and emotional.

Indeed, physical illness was rarely the only trigger for people to make lifestyle changes. *Sam beng*, too, had prompted many, especially women, to seek healing through green living. Although *sam beng* is often associated with emotional distress, none of my interviewees described their suffering as a mental illness. Pauline, Amanda, and Mandy were three devoted green living practitioners in their 60s, 30s, and 20s, respectively. They all agreed that “physical illnesses are relatively easy to fix (*san beng ji gaau*), but *sam beng* can be very tricky (*sam beng naan gaau*)”. Interestingly, without exception, their *sam beng* arose from problems in interpersonal relationships. When they said they were healing themselves through green living, they were not just trying to reclaim a sense of self, as Emily put it, but also attempting to heal their relationships with others. In other words, green living heals these individuals by endowing them with a new lens to rethink how to relate to the Other, whether that be another person, nature, or society at large. This is a crucial point, as it illustrates that green living is more than a neoliberal and individualistic self-help device.

Pauline was an activist and contemporary of Simon Chau when she was a university student. Long before the government rolled out the first comprehensive recycling program in 1998, Pauline had already initiated one of the first grassroots recycling programs in her own community in the early 1990s. “I was very influenced by Simon Chau back then, but not just by his environmentalism. I was especially drawn to his take on natural medicine. Western medicine only treats the symptoms (*tautung ji tau goektung ji goek*), whereas natural medicine treats a person holistically. Green living is like natural medicine. It doesn’t just fix the symptoms.”

Pauline’s confidence in green living was further boosted when her *sam beng*, which she said was the cause of her chronic migraine, was cured after cultivating her spirituality. “I used to think others were in the wrong; that they owed me something. These negative emotions gave me a migraine. But since I started meditating, I realized that it’s all about my attitude. I stopped blaming others and began to see my own problems. Once you sort out your *sam beng*, your negative emotions will be gone, and your health will improve.”

Except for Pauline, who was an atheist before her turn to spirituality. Both Mandy and Amanda were Christians before their green and spiritual awakening. “The spiritual cultivation at Club O had a huge impact on me,” Mandy recalled. “When I was young, I had low self-esteem. I got bullied by my peers a lot. My interpersonal relationships were terrible, and so was my relationship with myself. I was really depressed and had suicidal thoughts every night. When you can’t even come to terms with yourself, how can you have a good relationship with others, with the environment, or with the universe?” In retrospect, Mandy was grateful for the experience, seeing it as a blessing in disguise. “If there had been no setback,” she said, “I wouldn’t have pursued green living and a spiritual path.”

Unlike Mandy, Amanda did not discover green living following an adverse life event. She was first introduced to green living years ago through the organization called Green Women. “Those women had a lot of influence on me. Before I met them, I knew nothing about green living. They’ve shown me how to care for a family and for the environment as a woman. They’ve shown me other ways of living.”

Despite this, it was only after Amanda’s separation from her husband that she started to take everything she learned from Green Women seriously. “I was completely lost. I cried my eyes out every night. My husband and I have seen two marriage counsellors. I didn’t like the first one. She was very formulaic, suited up and all that. We stopped seeing her after the first meeting. The second one was the opposite. Very laid-back. We met her in her home, and the first thing she said to us was, you need to meditate.”

Thanks to the housewives who introduced her to green living, Amanda picked up meditation, Zen eating, and spiritual cultivation almost instantly. Their trips to the Gaia School, their green kitchen and meditation classes, sowed a seed inside Amanda, waiting for the moment to sprout. Looking back, Amanda said there was not an epiphany, so to speak. Instead, she saw her turn to green living and self-cultivation as a result of her accumulated experience (*zik cyun dik gingjim*) over the years. “I just wasn’t motivated to integrate them into my life until my marriage was breaking down.”

Then Amanda’s phone rang. It was her husband. I thought green living had saved their marriage, but it hadn’t, they were filing for a divorce. “We can’t just wipe away what had happened. The pain is real. The damage was done.” Amanda said calmly. “It doesn’t mean that we don’t love each other anymore. Love shouldn’t be defined by the status of the relationship. At this stage of my life, I want to focus on cultivating myself. I want to be more comfortable with myself (*zi zoi*), but not in an egoistic way (*m zi ngo*).”

As we got to know each other, Amanda confided in me about the darker side of her personality and its disastrous impact on her marriage. “I’ve struggled with anger issues since I was a kid. I can’t control my temper. I’ve physically and emotionally abused my husband. I got even angrier when he did not react to me. I would say, are you a man? Why don’t you hit back? I’d push him and push him till he exploded. It was very scary.”

Despite being a Christian for more than 20 years, Amanda admitted that prayers and the Bible did not help her at all. It was only until she learned to cultivate her spirituality (*ling sau*) through various practices of green living that she started to slowly pick her life up again. She said, “green living teaches me how to live and how to relate to others. As I cultivate myself, I learn what kind of person I want to become and what kind of life I should be living.”

**Spirituality, emotions, and the interplay of self and social transformation**

Why do people go green? What motivates them to take environmental actions? Individual life history is an under-explored yet important site of investigation regarding these questions, not least because there is a long-standing ethical-political tradition in China that sees social transformation as predicated on individual self-transformation (Zhang 2021). If social transformation does begin with self-transformation, how does self-transformation occur?

The green people in Hong Kong believed that the answer lies in the “heart”. The deep green in particular had critiqued traditional environmental education for focusing too much on the presentation of hard facts and not enough on evoking people’s positive emotions towards the environment. While knowledge-based environmental education plays a crucial role in raising public awareness, awareness alone does not lead to behavioral changes. That is why the affective power of example is so important. As a volunteer at Tzu Chi said, “Numbers don’t move (*zuk dung*) people. But when people see us picking up garbage for them on the street, they will be moved (*gam dung*).” Yeah Man made a similar point: “The key is to make people *love* the environment as much as they love their iPhones. When you love something, you won’t destroy it. You’ll do everything to protect it.”

So how do we make people fall in love with nature? Pierre, the spiritual environmentalist whom I introduced at the opening of this chapter, had already said it. One can’t fall in love with the head. It must involve the heart. Green living is the compass for the journey from the head to the heart.

This chapter tells the stories of people who wanted to “heal” nature, as well as those who were being “healed” by nature through the practice of green living. For a long time, studies of social movements have focused exclusively on the movement’s outcome, which is narrowly understood in terms of “success” or “failure”. This perspective risks discounting the meaning, impact, and potential transformative effects of the movement on the lives of those involved, especially if the overall movement or campaign is judged a “failure” (Cox 2023, 49). As a result, we don’t fully understand the effect of a social movement on the activists’ personal lives, nor do we know how the activists’ life experiences encourage their activism. Although research on environmental subjectivity is on the rise, it often examines governed subjects (Agrawal 2005a; Agrawal 2005) who are devoid of emotions and life histories. However, as scholars have increasingly stressed, a person’s affective, emotional, and spiritual experience plays a pivotal role in the formation of environmental subjectivity (Milton 2003; Norgaard 2011; Sponsel 2012). Without emotion, there would be “no commitment, no motivation, no action” (Milton 2003, 150). As I have demonstrated in this chapter, self-transformation and social transformation are inseparable. The spiritual-ecological practices under the umbrella of green living in Hong Kong offered people a means to introspect, re-organize, and even transform their lives during difficult life events and challenging life transitions. In turn, the emotional and spiritual experience of self-transformation not only reinforced people’s faith in the power of nature, but such positive experience was also key to perpetuating their interest and efforts in greening the world.

***4. Too Green to Be Good***

“Green living will inevitably distance you from your families and friends. After all, birds of a feather flock together (*mat ji leoi zeoi, jan ji kwan fan*)”.

Lemongrass, a 30-year-old green living practitioner

Although Chinese New Year was still three months away, green groups in Hong Kong had already been busy finalizing their waste reduction initiatives for the festive season since November. Green Buddies, an online interest group about green living, had decided to roll out a recycling scheme to collect used red envelopes from several local communities. Red envelopes, also known as red pockets or red packets, are monetary gifts given to friends, families, and strangers during special occasions such as Chinese New Year, weddings, and childbirth. Knowing my interest in green living, Amy and Tou-gor, two founding members of Green Buddies, invited me to a meeting two weeks before the Chinese New Year in 2013. When I arrived, Amy proudly took out a stack of used red envelopes (*lei si fung*) from her handbag. “I have been collecting them for quite some time now,” she said to the attendees, “why don’t we distribute what I’ve collected to people who don’t mind using them second-hand? We can also collect the used ones from residents who want to discard them during the distribution.” “That would be great!” Tou-gor exclaimed, “But I don’t know who would be open to reusing red envelopes. You know, old folks tend to avoid using second-hand envelopes. They are superstitious.”

After a rather lengthy discussion about where to distribute the used envelopes, some Green Buddies members at the meeting raised the issue of “tainted” envelopes. For a red envelope to be reused, it must be in a like-new condition. However, many people write the recipients’ names along with New Year greetings on the red envelopes, rendering them unusable again in the future.

I thought the solution would be straightforward. I remember suggesting, “Why don’t we start a campaign to urge people *not to* write on the red envelopes?” To my surprise, my proposal was met with strong resistance. “Loretta, you are too radical!” Amy admonished me, “Older folks often have difficulty remembering. They write names on the red envelopes to avoid accidentally giving a 100-dollar red envelope to the wrong person. It’s important not to mix them up. Being green is good, but at the same time, it shouldn’t upset or inconvenience people.”

The disagreement over whether one should write on red envelopes is just one example of the challenges faced in reconciling social norms with green living. For many of my interlocutors, festivals became seasons of tension rather than joy. Not only because consumerism peaks during the festive season, but also because the differences in values between the green people and their loved ones are amplified. Lisa, a green living advocate and full-time housewife, was especially perturbed by this, so much so that she wanted to forgo all Christmas and New Year celebrations. “I hate festivals in Hong Kong,” she lamented. “They are all about shopping and consumption. I’m so sick of it.”

Although Hong Kong is a highly anglicized society, it is entirely acceptable not to celebrate Christmas, as Christmas in Hong Kong is more about parties and gatherings with friends. In contrast, few can get away from celebrating Chinese New Year, a time traditionally reserved for family reunions. The norm is to spend the first and second days of the Chinese New Year visiting the closest kin, a tradition known as *baai nin* in Cantonese. If not approached with care and sensitivity*, baai nin* can be a highly stressful event and cause considerable friction within the family. Because of this, an increasing number of middle-class individuals choose to spend their New Year holidays away from Hong Kong—a practice referred to as *bei nin*,or literally, “avoiding the New Year”. *Bei nin* is not an option for Lisa, as both she and her husband have large extended families who wish to celebrate the festival together. Moreover, she wanted to uphold several New Year traditions for her children. For example, her family used to prepare New Year’s meals from scratch. But since her mother had a stroke, they resorted to takeout food. “My brothers and sisters are typical Hong Kong people. They don’t see anything wrong with it. They are not bothered by the disposables. But when I see the plastics, I immediately lose my appetite. All I can think of is them ending up in landfills, yet I can’t do anything about it. It’s frustrating because even though I’m recognized as an advocate for green living, I can’t seem to influence those closest to me.”

However, that wasn’t what upset Lisa the most. She understood that it would be inappropriate to lecture her family about plastic waste during Chinese New Year, so she refrained from commenting. What hurt her the most was when her relatives blatantly disregarded her efforts to follow social norms while adhering to the principles of green living. While Lisa thoughtfully wrapped her gifts to them with recycled paper or old fabrics, her relatives presented her with unwrapped gifts during the New Year. “They singled me out. Just because I am an environmentalist doesn’t mean that I won’t appreciate their thoughtfulness.” Lisa said with bitterness, interpreting her relatives’ unwrapped gifts as a passive-aggressive attack on her green lifestyle.

Green living is often touted as the easiest way to address the environmental crisis (Gibson et al. 2013). However, this chapter suggests the contrary. I argue that green living is far from easy; it demands thoughtful deliberation and enormous persistence to be green. Past research tended to concentrate on the practical challenges of household sustainability, like the lack of infrastructure and supporting policies (Carter and Mol 2007, 69). Only recently have researchers begun to pay attention to dilemmas such as “Is it worse to use plastic supermarket bags for bin liners, or to bring reusable green bags to supermarket but then purchase dedicated bin liners” (Gibson et al. 2013; also see Miller 2001). Still, scant attention, if any, has been given to the impact of green living on social relations and the balance people strike between being green and being “good”. A person is “good” when they fulfill the moral obligations in a given social context. But as Oxfeld points out, “All of us have to make decisions every day about how to live in our immediate environment, how to conduct ourselves within our families, with friends and acquaintances, in our economic transactions, in our spiritual and religious lives and in reference to the structures of power in which we live” (Oxfeld 2010, xv). Therefore, being “good” in one context may necessitate compromises in another. Realistically, nobody can be “good” all the time.

Contrary to popular belief propagated by the Hong Kong media, which often portrays figures like Simon Chau, Yeah Man, and Brother Au as green outliers dismissing societal norms, most green people do not aspire to be seen as nonconformists. They aim to meet both their moral and social obligations while practicing green living, fully aware of the ramifications of any perceived shortfall. Their overarching goal is to bring green living into the mainstream, not to sideline it. This chapter delves into the tightrope that green people walk between being green and being good. I explore challenges such as how to reduce banquet waste without appearing frugal; whether one can be a good husband and father as a vegan; and how to honor ancestors as someone who lives green. In essence, how did these individuals navigate the duality of their moral worlds, and what compromises did they find necessary?

## Greening wedding banquets

Banqueting is an elaborated form of commensality (Oxfeld 2020, 2). It is also deeply entwined in the “moral economies[[13]](#footnote-13) of social relationships, moral obligations, and status creation” (2020, 13). During the economic boom of the 1980s and 1990s, a traditional Hong Kong wedding banquet flaunted a lavish 12-course meal. This typically comprised a whole roasted suckling pig, a rich soup with shark fin if the host could afford it, a crispy whole chicken, a premium fish like grouper, and an array of seafood dishes featuring scallops, prawns, abalone, or lobsters. This procession concluded with rice, noodles, fruit, and traditional Cantonese desserts. By the time the rice and noodles arrived, guests were often full to the brim. As a result, substantial portions of rice, noodles, fruits, and desserts ended up discarded. In some instances, even an entire dish went untouched. Investigative journalist Leila Chan revealed that a medium-sized wedding banquet[[14]](#footnote-14) in Hong Kong produced, on average, 120kg of food waste in a single evening (Chan 2011, 12).

This staggering statistic propelled the green people into action. In 2012, a cohort of university students founded a volunteer initiative named The Leftover, aiming to rescue and redistribute uneaten banquet food to the homeless. Around the same time, the environmental NGO Friends of the Earth (FOE) introduced a campaign promoting a switch from the conventional 12-course banquet to more concise 10-course or 6-course menus. Using auspicious phrases like “The Ten Perfections” (*sap cyun sap mei*) and “The Everlasting Six” (*lukluk moukung*), FOE endeavored to persuade prospective brides and grooms to reduce the number of courses served. Their stance was clear: “Couples shouldn’t see it as a downgrade. Instead, they should see it as an opportunity to upgrade their dish quality with the same budget. It is quality rather than quantity that matters.”

But did their message resonate? According to a 2011 FOE survey, 60% of couples said they would be willing to go for a pared-down wedding menu to combat banquet food waste. While this looked promising, in practice, many couples continued to favor the 12-course tradition. They expressed concerns that a downsized menu might appear stingy or cause their parents to “lose face” (*mou min*). Those willing to truncate their menu invariably felt the need to supplement their offering with more expensive, albeit not always sustainable ingredients, such as bird’s nest and abalone. While the older generation frequently earned praise for their frugality, young people often blamed them for their insistence on extravagance, saying that it thwarted their aspirations for a more sustainable wedding celebration.

To illustrate, Katie and Jamie are a professional couple in their early 30s. Although they were aware of the banquet food waste issue while planning their wedding, they still opted for the traditional 12-course menu, fearing that a smaller menu would make them “look cheap” (*hon syun*). However, they did respond to the “Green Luck Banquet” campaign’s appeal. They donated all surplus food to those in need, deliberately removed shark fin from their menu (*mou ci*) and included at least one vegetarian course in their banquet (*sou jat dou*). The couple later discovered that an impressive 9.4kg of food was salvaged from their environmentally-conscious wedding banquet.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Jamie & Katie**  **Green Luck Banquet**  A campaign by Green Monday and Good Angel  Logo, company name  Description automatically generated  Thank you for supporting Jamie & Katie’s Green Luck Banquet! Through Green Monday and Good Angel, surplus food will be donated to people in need.  Love and care our environment and community. Please support the Green LUCK Banquet. | **Menu**  Barbecued Whole Suckling Pig  Sautéed Scallops and Shrimps with Vegetables  Deep Fried Shrimp Balls with Crispy Milk Fritters  Stewed Twin Vegetables with Fresh Crab Meat  Braised Bird’s Nest Soup with Minced Chicken and Bamboo Piths  Braised Sliced Abalone with Vegetables in Oyster Sauce  Steamed Sabah Giant Grouper  Deep-fried Crispy Chicken  Fried Rice with Assorted Meats  Braised E-fu Noodles in Oyster Sauce  Sweetened Red Bean Cream with Lotus Seeds and Lily Bulbs  Chinese Petits Fours |

**TABLE 1**: A reproduction of Jamie and Katie’s Green Luck Banquet Menu. The Green LUCK Banquet campaign was launched by social enterprise Green Monday in 2013. The acronym LUCK stands for “low carbon”, “unwasted”, “community care”, and “kind to our world”.

Couples found it difficult to reduce the scale of their wedding menus because wedding banquets are, in effect, a moral economy of gift-giving. They stand as one of the most prevalent and significant forms of reciprocity in contemporary Chinese societies. In Chinese weddings, guests are expected to present cash gifts when attending a banquet. Attending a banquet without making a cash contribution is unacceptable. It’s no coincidence that this wedding gift money is termed *jancing* in Cantonese (or *renqing* in Mandarin), meaning “favor” or “indebtedness”. The amount of the cash gifts[[15]](#footnote-15) not only reflects “the degree of closeness between giver and recipient” (*gaau cing*) (Yan 1996, 56), but is also directly correlated to the “grandness” (*paai tau*) of the venue. For instance, guests are expected to make a larger contribution if the banquet takes place in a hotel, as hotels are considered posher than restaurants. However, if the meal is served as a Western-style buffet, the cash gift amount would be reduced significantly. In short, the wedding banquet is “an immediate reciprocity made by the host to the guests” (Yan 1996:47). The newlyweds are morally obliged to treat their guests in a manner commensurate with both the cash gifts received and the stature of the venue. This is not only to return their guests’ favors and preserve the host’s face; but also to maintain the long-term relationship between the two parties. The more generous the cash gift, the deeper the indebtedness of the brides and grooms to their guests. As anthropologist Yunxiang Yan observed, “the banquet is at best only a small part of the reciprocal return a host can make to his guests immediately after receiving the gifts; the major part of the social debt has to be repaid in the future” (Yan 1996, 47-48).

Therefore, when the bride and groom downsize their wedding menu, they risk infringing the ethics of reciprocity. As one of my interlocutors said, “If your guests gave you a couple hundred dollars, you must serve them something good!” Another added, “Regardless of the host’s decision, they must ensure that no guests are left hungry.”

Of course, the ethics of *jancing* work both ways. If a guest fails to give the newlyweds a cash gift commensurate with the class of the venue or the depth of their relationship without good reasons, this lack of contribution would be interpreted as miserly. Sometimes, such an oversight can even lead to the end of a friendship.

Green living has not only destabilized the moral calculus of the gift money tradition in relation to the value of the menu but has also brought the ethics of the food into the spotlight. For example, shark fin became a wedding staple in Hong Kong during the 1990s as it symbolized wealth and status. The more shark fins the bride and groom served, the more face they and their families would gain. Moreover, since shark fin was usually the most expensive dish on the wedding menu, both the host and the guests viewed it as immediate reciprocity. However, the rise of environmental consciousness has led people to question the ethics of serving and eating shark fins. The issue gained prominence after computer engineer Clement Lee launched the highly impactful “Cut Gift Money for Shark Fin Banquet” campaign (the literal translation of the campaign in Chinese is “Discount your gift 30% if they serve shark fin at a wedding banquet”) upon watching a video of shark-finning online. The campaign debuted on a Facebook group in 2010. The pledge, available in both Chinese and English, read:

As banquet goers, traditionally we could not affect the hosts on their menu choices — even if they decided to serve shark fin soup, which has dire environmental consequences for the sharks and ourselves. At the same time, we all understand we the banquet goers are the true financiers of the banquets—we pay for our own meals in the name of “gift money” in the red envelopes.

As such, if we are concerned about our environment, why don’t we just “follow the money” and make a change at the source?! I suggest that we pledge to cut our gift money—by 30%—if we know in advance that shark fin soup will be served in the banquets. We will also pledge to donate the balance to organizations that are promoting the well-being of our environment.

Within days, Lee’s campaign had garnered support from thousands of netizens. In contrast to previous marine conservation campaigns, the Cut Gift Money campaign resonated with ordinary people in a way that international NGOs had never achieved. By framing shark finning not merely as an animal welfare issue but as a moral problem that everyone could relate to (i.e., determining the appropriate amount of gift money), the campaign successfully convinced wedding guests of their power in the moral transaction of gift-giving and their potential influence on the hosts’ choice. Before the Cut Gift Money initiative, marine conservation in Hong Kong was mostly championed by a select group of environmentalists. Although the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) has been part of the Global Seafood Choice Initiative since 2007, most Hongkongers remained unaware of their campaign against shark fins. The Cut Gift Money campaign didn’t just revive WWF’s interest in marine sustainability, but it also contributed to a 47% reduction in shark fin consumption three years after the campaign was launched (WWF 2014).

**Yeah Man’s exemplary green wedding**

Yeah Man and Ah Ngau’s wedding is considered an exemplary wedding in the green living community. The couple first met during a training course at the Gaia School. Naturally, they wanted to have their wedding there because they felt the school reflects their commitment to green living.

Given Yeah Man’s public persona as a radical deep green, many anticipated their wedding would defy convention. Surprisingly, the couple honored every traditional Chinese wedding custom. On their wedding day, Yeah Man wore a grey Zhongshan suit while Ah Ngau graced a hand-sewn white dress. Following the traditional tea ceremony (*ging caa*), during which the couple served tea to their parents and other senior family members, guests proceeded to the Gaia School’s open-air playground for the main event. Unlike most brides and grooms in Hong Kong, who hired fancy limousines for their big day, Yeah Man and Ah Ngau chose the humble bus as their wedding transport.

Wedding decorations were kept to a minimum. Interestingly, there were a few educational posters about the environmental impact of gold jewelry and conflict diamonds. To walk the talk, Ah Ngau refused to wear any gold jewelry other than heirlooms. Instead of diamond rings, Ah Ngau and Yeah Man exchanged vows over woven grass rings made from leaves from one of their home-grown plants. “Diamonds have nothing to do with eternity. Our grass rings are from nature and will go back to nature.”

In the presence of over 300 green friends, Yeah Man and Ah Ngau pronounced their love for each other with a wedding vow worded with their environmental values: “I promise to care about you sustainably (*wing zuk dei*) even in the absence of material wealth.” After the ceremony, the guests were invited to a buffet reception at the playground of the Gaia School. To promote Bring Your Own Cutlery (BYOC), guests were asked to bring their own plates and cutlery to the reception. Extraordinarily, all compiled. People in the green living circle understood why they were asked to do it. And people who were not in this circle were excited by the novelty of a BYOC reception.

Unlike the conventional sit-down meal, the buffet consisted of 16 vegetarian dishes, lovingly prepared by friends of the couple. No alcohol was served during the event, which would be unacceptable in conventional Chinese banquets. The buffet included food like organic salad, homemade organic bread, brown rice balls, dried fruits, vegan spaghetti, vegan dumplings, Chayote with sesame sauce, and Roselle flower gelatine desserts. Intriguingly, *wun tsai chi*, literally “a small bowl of shark fin soup”, was also served. *Wun tsai chi* is a local street food that is made up of cellophane noodles, mushrooms, eggs, and soy sauce. Because its texture resembles shark fin soup, Hong Kong people consider *wun tsai chi* the “shark fin for the poor people”. Although both Yeah Man and Ah Ngau were vegans who are strongly against the consumption of shark fin, they still served their guests this symbolically rich wedding dish to mark the significance of the event.

In Hong Kong, as is the case in richer parts of China since the reform, “meat remained an important part of everyday diets and festive meals, and to many, it was an important signifier of affluence” (Klein 2017, 264; also see Lora-Wainwright 2007). Thus, the decision to hold a vegetarian banquet could potentially break the existing social fabric. As several guests told me after the wedding, although they enjoyed the experience, they would not be so audacious in their own celebrations.

Indeed, Yeah Man and Ah Ngau would not have had the liberty to hold a green wedding and defy some of the traditions if their parents were not supportive of them. In their wedding speech, both the bride and the groom admitted that it had taken their families many years to accept their unconventional way of living, but they thanked them for their acceptance and understanding.

Ah Ngau was especially emotional about it: “I want to thank my family for letting us have this green wedding. I also want to thank them for accepting Yeah Man and his green living. I know it’s not easy.” Echoing her sentiments, Yeah Man smiled shyly as he thanked his in-laws and his parents for accepting his green lifestyle. “I remember when I first became a vegetarian, things were really tough for my parents, but together we’ve overcome it.” After their speeches, the couple received another round of applause and cheers.

## The Closet Vegetarians

I never asked Yeah Man and Ah Ngau how long it had taken their families to accept their radical green living. It’s evident that such acceptance did not happen overnight. While Hong Kong’s vegetarian scene has seen significant growth in recent years, going from 2.5% in 2016 to 3.7% in 2018, vegetarians (*sousik ze*) remain a minority (Moni Group 2018). Environmental protection (*waanbao*), animal welfare, health, food safety, and religious reasons are among the top justifications for adopting a vegetarian lifestyle in Hong Kong. Often, individuals cite multiple reasons for their conversion to vegetarianism. Traditionally, health and religious motives were the primary reasons. However, concerns like environment, animal welfare, and food safety have gained traction more recently (Klein 2017; Goossaert and Palmer 2011). In my research, I also found that the death or serious illness of a family member could trigger someone to become vegetarian. For example, Crystal embraced veganism when her mother-in-law was diagnosed with terminal cancer just a month before her wedding. Fearing her mother-in-law might not be present for the wedding, Crystal resolved to give up meat indefinitely if her in-law could attend. Remarkably, her mother-in-law recovered after undergoing chemotherapy. This “miracle” bolstered Crystal’s faith in Buddhism and the benefits of veganism. When she lost her father a few years later, she even gave up the five spices (*ng san*) in the hope it would aid her father in reaching the “pure land” sooner. Top of FormBottom of Form

Because vegetarianism is such an integral part of green living, around 40% of my interlocutors identified as vegetarian or flexitarian. As with vegetarians in other parts of China (Klein 2017), regardless of their justifications, few of my vegetarian green friends received support from their immediate families. In fact, their decision to go vegetarian often led to conflicts, prompting some of them to “hide in the vegetarian closet”[[16]](#footnote-16) to avoid confrontations with their families. Even Simon Chau, arguably the most famous (raw) vegan[[17]](#footnote-17) in Hong Kong, consistently warned that vegetarianism could deeply impact one’s social and family life: “If you want to go vegetarian (*sik sou*)[[18]](#footnote-18), be ready for a broken family (*gaa po jan mong*)!”

Considering the rise of individualism (Yan 2009) and the growing popularity of vegetarianism in China (Klein 2017), the reluctance to openly practice vegetarianism among some of my interlocutors might come as a surprise to many. But as scholars have increasingly pointed out, Chinese people, including those in Hong Kong, have maintained a strong sense of commitment towards their families (Santos and Harrell 2017; Davis, and Friedman 2014; Chan and Ku 2009). For instance, almost all my vegetarian green friends in Hong Kong were willing to make some compromises on the dining table for the sake of family harmony.

Throughout the centuries, much debate about vegetarianism in China has been about balancing the wish of the vegetarians and the expectation of the society (Kieschnick 2005), as “complete abstinence from meat…was widely frowned upon when taken up by lay people” (Klein 2017, 259). When dining with non-vegetarians, many green people concealed their vegetarian status unless they were certain that their non-vegetarian friends and family would accept their dietary choices. To avoid further explanation, many were content with eating *dip bin coi[[19]](#footnote-19)*—vegetables cooked and served with meat on the same plate—when dining with their non-vegetarian friends and families. As Janet disclosed, “Chinese people are more reserved. We eat *dip bin coi* because we don’t want other people to accommodate us. We don’t want to ruin the atmosphere.” Another vegetarian concurred, “Sharing food with others is a joy. If someone puts a piece of meat in my bowl, I’m okay with it. I don’t want people to think that I’m troublesome.”

Sometimes eating *dip bin coi* is the only option when eating out. In the summer of 2013, I took a group of visiting professors to a famous Cantonese restaurant in Sheung Wan. Our excitement for authentic Cantonese food was quickly dampened when we discovered that the menu lacked vegetarian dishes. Being the only Cantonese speaker at the table, I was tasked with asking the kitchen to modify a dish for a vegetarian guest. The waiter brusquely denied my request, saying, “Don’t be crazy! What kind of soup would that be if we take the meat out?” In the end, the vegetarian professor had to settle for *dip bin coi.*

However, only people who became vegetarian for environmental reasons would make compromise like eating *dip bin coi* during social occasions. These “environmental vegetarians” argued that “wasting food is a crime worse than eating meat” and that “asking people to make an extra vegetarian dish for me in a wedding banquet would increase carbon emission.” In contrast, devout Buddhists who believe in the “karmic consequences of meat-eating” (Kieschnick 2005:208) would never make such concessions.

Eating *dip bin coi* was not only a common compromise during banquets and other social occasions. Even at home, many green people resorted to eating *dip bin coi* to appease their families. Tree, a 27-year-old, never disclosed his vegetarianism to his parents. “I just asked them to cook less meat. I didn’t mention the environment. I just told my mom it’s cheaper and healthier to eat vegetables. Sometimes, when they notice I'm not eating meat, they ask why. They worry I will become malnourished. To pacify them, I sometimes eat a piece or two, to get by (*jing cau haak*).”

However, in some households, even *dip bin coi* wasn’t an acceptable middle ground. Giselle faced strong opposition from her parents when she chose vegetarianism. They even said to her, “Don’t tell others that you’re our daughter. We are ashamed of you”. Similarly, Piggy, a 24-year-old student influenced by Yeah Man, often dodged her parents’ questions about her meat avoidance, until one day her father slammed his hand down, demanding to know, “Will you never eat meat again?” Piggy recounted the intense argument to me, describing her father’s fury when she finally confessed her vegetarian lifestyle.

Since Piggy had “come out” about her vegetarianism, dinner became a constant battlefield. When she tried to negotiate with her father, he pushed for a compromise. “My dad said if I didn’t eat meat, I had to eat fish. He was unyielding on this. Since he has already made a concession, I don’t want to make things more difficult than it must be, so I paid lip service to him. I eat fish at home, but I abstain when I’m out on my own.”

As it turned out, Piggy’s father was also paying lip service to her. He continued to pressure her to eat meat. “Once, he placed a piece of meat in my bowl. I was upset but remained silent, pushing the meat to the edge of my bowl. I just kept eating. But when my dad left for the kitchen, my mother ate the piece for me. It was a touching gesture.”

At first, I thought the challenges faced by Tree, Piggy, and Giselle might be attributed to their younger age and their deference and submission to their parents. But when 60-year-old Joan told me she had waited a year to tell her 80-year-old mother that she decided to *sik sou*, I recognized that the challenges of vegetarianism in Hong Kong weren’t comparable to places like the U.K., where dietary preferences are openly communicated and respected. Joan’s apprehension before “coming out” and my interlocutors’ domestic struggle point to the negative perceptions of vegetarianism in Chinese society. The stigma stems from the perception that “normal people don’t go vegetarian for no reason” (*m wui mou dyundyun sik sou*). As I mentioned earlier, traditionally, health and religious reasons were the primary motivations for people in China to become vegetarian, whereas concerns about the environment, animal welfare, and food safety are relatively recent developments (Klein 2017; Goossaert and Palmer 2011). Therefore, when someone becomes a vegetarian, it is common for others to assume that the individual has shifted to vegetarianism because they have a health issue, experienced a setback in life, or did something that requires redemption through non-killing. In most cases, the families of these environmentally-conscious individuals refuse to accept the environmental justifications for vegetarianism, suspecting instead that their children’s “sudden conversion” points to a larger personal crisis.

The stigma associated with vegetarianism affects men more than women due to the enduring cultural link between vegetarianism and femininity, and meat with masculinity (Maurer 2002, 11). Although women have historically played a significant role in advancing lay vegetarianism in China (Kieschnick 2005: 203), the dynamics between men and vegetarianism are more complicated. For men, meat-eating is perceived as not only a pillar of manhood and masculinity but also as a marker of social prestige (Kieschnick 2005, 204). To challenge this notion, young vegetarian men in Hong Kong strategically combined vegetarianism and bodybuilding, transforming themselves from the stereotype of the “fragile vegetarian man” to the “vegetarian muscle man.” Despite this, lingering stereotypes persist; vegetarian men are frequently deemed less masculine and less competitive than their meat-eating counterparts. People also compared vegetarian men to monks, who live with minimal interest in worldly matters or familial responsibilities.

Such perceptions have considerably hindered the acceptance of vegetarianism among Hong Kong men. For example, when Mr Wong, a pious Buddhist, tried to become a vegetarian 20 years ago, his decision was met with fierce opposition from his family:

My wife, my two daughters, my parents, my in-laws, my brother, and my wife’s brother were all very shocked by my decision. My wife and my parents begged, cried, and asked what was wrong with me. They thought I wanted to become a monk and I didn’t love the family anymore. In the end, I had no choice but to give up my decision to become vegan. What else could I do? I couldn’t break up the family for the sake of being a vegan. The timing was not right (*jyun fan mei dou*). Any persistence on my part would have been perceived as obstinacy (*zap zoek*).

Now a retiree in his mid-60s, Mr Wong has freed himself from most social obligations and can finally embrace vegetarianism wholeheartedly. He returned to being a vegetarian during his wife’s battle with terminal cancer. This time his family’s response was markedly different. They deeply respected Mr Wong’s commitment to remain a lifelong vegetarian in honor of his dying wife. “If you adopt vegetarianism for the benefit of others, people will be more understanding,” Mr Wong observed. After his wife’s passing, he suggested to his two daughters that they could *sik zaai*[[20]](#footnote-20) in honor of their mother. Elated to know that there were still things that they could do for their late mother, both of his daughters decided to become vegetarians.[[21]](#footnote-21) Mr Wong’s account not only highlights the distinct challenges confronted by male vegetarians in Hong Kong, but also emphasizes the broader societal preference for religious reasons over environmental motivations when it comes to vegetarianism.

## Green Interments

In China, Ching Ming is a festival dedicated to the remembrance of ancestors. On this day, people honor their deceased family members by visiting their graves or columbaria, offering food and incense, burning “ghost money”, and clearing weeds and leaves near the tombs.

“What about the rubbish?” Chi Wah posed this question on her public social media account after a day of litter-picking on Ching Ming Festival. “Every year we follow the elderly’s instruction to brush the leaves and remove the weeds, but turn a blind eye to the plastic waste in and near the graveyards. Isn’t it ludicrous that we spend all day removing things that belong to nature, but leave the human trash behind?”

Besides tomb-sweeping, filial descendants also bring their ancestors offerings such as incense, ghost money, distilled liquor, and food on this special day (Watson 1988, 221; Thompson 1988, 71). Chinese environmentalists often criticize this “outdated tradition” for generating a significant amount of “white waste” and causing wildfires. To address the problem, many environmental organizations in Hong Kong have encouraged tomb-sweepers to replace paper offerings with fresh flowers. The “No wildfire on Ching Ming Day” campaign, initiated by the Conservancy Association, aimed to discourage the burning of incense and paper offerings for ancestors. While most green people supported this initiative, few could influence their family’s practices.

The green people’s deep concern for ecological and multispecies wellbeing means they noticed not only the loss of vegetation to wildfires, but also the resulting loss of life. Mr Pang, a vegan and core member of Club O, wrote this passage on his Facebook a day after the Ching Ming festival: “Millions of insects and small animals were burnt to death by the Ching Ming candles and incense! Ching Ming is a tragic day for these sentient beings (*zungsaang*)!” Yet, in a subsequent interview, he told me that he didn’t oppose the practice of *siu ji* (burning paper offerings). He explained, “People use ghost money to pay respects to their ancestors. Even though I don’t practice it myself, I understand their reasons. My main issue is with the unnecessary killing of animals and using meat as offerings.”

As many historians and anthropologists have pointed out, food and paper offerings are essential in fostering and maintaining a reciprocal relationship between ancestors and descendants in Chinese societies (Watson, 1988; Thompson 1988, 71). Of all the foods offered on the Ching Ming festival, chicken and pork are the most indispensable (Thompson 1988:78; Watson, 1988:222), especially in affluent societies like Hong Kong. Being a descendant of one of the most prestigious lineages in the New Territories, Mr Pang’s rejection of meat offerings signified a shifting in values. In this instance, his identity as a vegan and environmentalist trumped his identity as an indigenous villager in the New Territories. However, his defense of paper offerings demonstrates his willingness to make a compromise by choosing what he thought was the lesser of two evils.

The challenge of balancing green living and filial piety was also seen in discussions about green interment (*luksik banzong*). A month before the Ching Ming Festival in 2015, a green friend mentioned a photography competition on green interments. The competition, strangely named “Passing Down Filial Piety” instead of “Green Interments”, was organized by the board of management of the Chinese Cemeteries (BMCC) to promote green interment as a filial alternative to the traditional columbarium. Although cremation has slowly replaced burial since the 1970s (Teather 1999), Hong Kong still faces a severe shortage of public columbaria spaces[[22]](#footnote-22). As of 2021, the waiting time for a public columbarium space ranged between a month and 10 years, depending on the location. To secure a public columbarium space, residents needed to make an application to the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) and wait for an allocation.[[23]](#footnote-23) Given that this application process ironically mirrors that of public housing, some Hongkongers jokingly said that Hong Kong is not only short of housing for the living (*joeng zaak*), but also housing for the dead (*jam zaak*).

Over the past decade, the Hong Kong government has been actively promoting green interment as an alternative to traditional interments. An excerpt from one official pamphlet reads, “Returning to nature after death nourishes and blesses the living. The bereaved can also find solace knowing that their loved ones live on in another form.” The pamphlet quotes an elderly woman who pre-arranged her ashes to be scattered at the Garden of Remembrance so that she could “rest in peace with nature” and “leave more precious space and fresh air to the world.”

Currently, Hong Kong offers two green interment options. Residents can choose to scatter the cremains in one of the 13 Gardens of Remembrance (increased from 8 since my 2013 fieldwork to 13 by 2023) or scatter the ashes at sea. When the Garden of Remembrance was first introduced in the 1960s, few Hong Kong Chinese considered it a moral alternative to traditional interments. However, as the shortage of columbaria spaces worsened, green interments quickly became a viable and economical choice. A green interment is a cost-effective option because upon approval by the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department the applicant can arrange to scatter the cremains right away. There is no queueing for the service, and it is free-of-charge. In contrast, a public columbarium space during the early 2010s was priced between $2,800-$3,700 HKD, which was already much cheaper than private niches, which could cost anything from $50,000-$500,000 HKD.

Thanks to the active promotion of the government, the prevalence of green interment has significantly increased from 3400 cases in 2013 to 9449 in 2022 (GovHK Press Release 2023). While low/no cost and convenience are two pragmatic factors that account for this rise in acceptance, it was clear from the statistics that the growing acceptance of green interment parallels the increasing endorsement of environmental protection and green living since the early 2010s. Indeed, applications for green interments have increased by nearly 25% since 2008.

Still, for green interments to be morally acceptable, it must be aligned with the Chinese ethics of funeral rites, which can be summarized as *sei jau so zong,* or having a final resting place. The modern interpretation of “a final resting place” has been extended from burial on land to placing cremated ashes in a fixed columbaria space. The significance of having a final resting place is reflected in the discrepancy between the number of applications for burial at sea and burial in a garden. Of the 9449 cases of green burials in 2023, only 1012 cases were sea burials (GovHK Press Release 2023). While both forms of green burial evoke the “back to nature” discourse (*wui gwai zi jin*), one significant distinction between scattering ashes at sea and doing so at the garden memorial is that the former has to repeatedly urge the family to “let go” so the deceased can “go carefree for once” (*siu saa jat ci*). While the Garden of Remembrance emphasizes the solace of returning to the soil and becoming a tree for the descendants to enjoy the shade (*luk jam hau jan*); scattering ashes at sea highlights the joy of freedom and liberation in the ocean.

For green interments, the moral foundation extends beyond just maintaining a filial relationship between the living and the dead. Giving the deceased parents a traditional burial may be moral in the sense that it is filial and conventional, but it is not necessarily ethical according to the ethics of green living, which has complicated such ethical calculus.

**Being green and being good**

Contrary to prevalent stereotypes suggesting that being green is an easy consumption practice (Miller 2001; Gibson et al. 2014), green living in Hong Kong is rife with conflicts and moral predicaments. The lack of moral support from family members was oft-cited as the most challenging part of living a green life in Hong Kong, yet very little research has paid heed to the impact of green living on practitioners’ interpersonal relations and the consequential ramifications on everyday ethics (Das 2012; Lambek 2010; Oxfeld 2010; Stafford 2013). In examining the green people’s ethical deliberations during special occasions and their struggles with being vegetarian in everyday life, I highlight the disjuncture between the expectation of being “good” and the aspiration of being green. Although this chapter is largely focused on the disheartening aspect of being green, the next chapter will focus on the positive. That is, the setback that the green people experienced in their intimate social circle has motivated them to forge new relations with people who share their values. Together they build a new world in the shell of the old—a green new world that offers them an opportunity to live otherwise.

***5.******Build a Green New World***

“We suffer so much because we are confined to the city of Hong Kong. We can’t move out of the city like people in London or Tokyo. In Hong Kong, there is no countryside to move to. We are stuck here. There are no alternatives.”

Matt, a 35-year-old environmentalist and ornithologist

On a cold afternoon in February 2013, several green friends and I joined a guided walking tour of Ping Che and Ta Kwu Ling, two areas that were affected by the government’s urbanization plans. Throughout my fieldwork in 2012 and 2013, walking tours like this were regularly organized by the Land Justice League (LJL) and the non-indigenous villagers in these areas, aiming to introduce outsiders like myself to their campaign against the Northeast New Territories Development Plan (hereafter NENT Development Plan). Touted as one of the largest urbanization projects since the 1980s, the Hong Kong government claimed that the NENT Development Plan would release 150 hectares of land for the construction of 53800 new apartments, offering an immediate solution for Hong Kong’s housing crisis.

In Hong Kong, “non-indigenous villagers” (*fei jyun geoi man*) are people whose ancestors did not live in the New Territories prior to 1898. Under the Convention for the Extension of Hong Kong Territory, the Qing Empire agreed to lease the territories north of Boundary Street and South of the Shenzhen River to the United Kingdom for 99 years, rent-free, from 1898. When the lease expired on 30 June 1997, the People’s Republic of China resumed sovereignty over Hong Kong the next day, ending 156 years of British colonial rule.

In this sense, most Hong Kong people are “non-indigenous”. But the term “non-indigenous villagers” (*fei jyun geoi man*) refers specifically to descendants of mainland Chinese refugees who settled in the New Territories during the Sino-Japanese War and the subsequent Chinese revolutions in the mid-twentieth century. These refugees made a living through farming after their arrival in the New Territories (Lou 2017a).

In contrast, indigenous villagers (*jyun geoi man*) are those whose paternal ancestors had been living in the New Territories before the British gained control of the region in 1898. In terms of ethnicity, they comprised mainly Han Chinese and Hakka (Chan 1998, 40). When the British gained control of the region in 1898, they promised the indigenous villagers that they would not interfere with their ways of living (Chan 1999, 234). Today, the Basic Law continues to protect the lawful traditional rights and interests of the indigenous inhabitants of the New Territories (Basic Law Article 40).

Though the distinction between “indigenous” and “non-indigenous” villagers is now a widely recognized fact, these two identity categories were only created in 1972 when the British colonial government enacted the *ding uk* policy (a.k.a. Small House Policy) as a compensation to pacify the indigenous villagers over the government’s plan to develop on their lands. Before the *ding uk* policy came into effect, villagers in the New Territories were simply called “inhabitants”, “residents”, or “villagers” by the British colonialists (Chan 1998, 40).

Under the *ding uk* policy, only male descendants (*ding*) of indigenous villagers are entitled to build a three-floor house of no more than 700 square feet per floor, once in their lifetime (S. C. Chan 1999, 235-238). The *ding uk* policy is controversial not only because it perpetuates the sexist custom of patrilineal inheritance, but it also divides the inhabitants in the New Territories into people with entitlement and people without.

According to the Planning Department, nearly 70% of agricultural land in Hong Kong is privately owned by indigenous villagers. As Hong Kong’s demands for land continue, investors have been eyeing and hoarding these indigenous lands (*tyun dei*) since the 1980s. Indigenous villagers were happy to cooperate as they also wanted to take advantage of the government’s urbanization plan by selling their farmlands to real estate developers for a sizable amount of money. Statistics from the Lands Department show that in the ten years between 2003 to 2013, nearly half the *ding* house owners have applied for Removal of Restriction on Alienation and sold their lands.

In comparison, non-indigenous villagers appeared to be the biggest losers in the Northeast New Territories Development Plan. When they first arrived in Hong Kong as refugees during the 1950s and the 1960s, they settled in the villages in the New Territories and made a living by farming. Some of them farmed on the “crown land” (now known as government land) leased by the colonial government[[24]](#footnote-24) while others rented their lands from indigenous villagers. “We didn’t have any lawnmowers back then. We had to remove the weeds by hand; it was hard work. That's why the indigenous villagers were willing to let us farm their lands. They even allowed us to use the land rent-free for the first three years, knowing that we wouldn’t see any yield initially,” a non-indigenous villager recalled. “We used to have a good relationship. The indigenous villagers treated us. But everything changed when they struck deals with the land grabbers. Now, when we encounter each other in the village, the atmosphere is kind of tense and awkward (*min zozo*).”

The non-indigenous villagers felt particularly betrayed by the Rural Committee. Although this body was supposed to represent both indigenous and non-indigenous villagers, at least in theory, the non-indigenous community felt marginalized. They accused the Rural Committee of colluding with the indigenous villagers, secretly making deals with both the government and real estate developers. “The Rural Committee only echoes the views of the indigenous villagers. They completely ignore the wishes of the non-indigenous community, who’ve greatly contributed to the New Territories over the past decades. We transformed their barren lands into fertile soil. We shouldn’t be treated this way,” said a non-indigenous villager.

Given the social power and legal entitlements of the indigenous villagers, the government’s development plan primarily targeted villages that were occupied by non-indigenous villagers, like Ping Che and Ta Kwu Ling. It was simply easier to relocate tenants than landlords. Moreover, in the case of land resumption, indigenous villagers also received significantly better compensation than their non-indigenous counterparts.

With the backing of the Land Justice League, an activist group founded in 2011 by environmentalists, scholar-activists, and left-leaning politicians, the non-indigenous villagers from Ping Che and Ta Kwu Ling established the “Homeland Defence Alliance” in the summer of 2012 to oppose the NENT Development Plan. To raise public awareness of their situations, they organized guided walking tours for people from the city, hoping to win their sympathy. “We want to ask you for a small favour,” our tour guide said, “We just hope you’ll share what you witnessed today with others.”

During the walking tour, there was palpable resentment towards the 1972 *ding uk* policy. For many non-indigenous villagers and urban Hong Kong residents, *ding uk* policy is outdated, discriminatory, and unjust. “The government must abolish the *ding uk* policy! We are all Hongkongers. Why do indigenous inhabitants have the birthright to construct their homes, while the rest of us have to work our ass off for a mortgage for a tiny apartment?”

While the government asserted that the NENT Development Plan would increase housing for Hong Kong residents, few found this credible. My interlocutors contended that the scheme’s true intention was to mainlandize (*daai luk faa*) Hong Kong. They believed that the upcoming developments weren’t intended for the average Hongkonger, but were designed to transform the “last green haven of Hong Kong” into an enclave for China’s affluent.

Even if the apartments were really built for Hong Kong people, removing those who have been living there for generations with covert violence was undisputedly unjust. “These shameless scums keep harassing the old folks in the village. People are forced to leave their homes by the government, real estate developers, and the indigenous villagers. It’s *gun soeng hoeng bik*! Is that right, Cheng *popo*?” The tour guide asked one of the old farmers at the organic farm that we were visiting. A bit shy to speak loudly in front of so many strangers, the tour guide attentively handed *popo*, a term of endearment for old lady in Cantonese, his wireless microphone.

“Well, I feel very helpless *la*.” Cheng *popo* said with a sigh. “We’re just farmers, how are we going to fight back? Alas, I don’t know what to say…My livelihood depends on it. I have good relations with my neighbours. I have feelings (*jau gam cing*) for this place. I have feelings for farming. I raised four children on this farm. I know nothing but farming. I like it here. I don’t want to leave. If you move me to a high-rise apartment. I worry I’d go crazy. Every time I go to the city, I feel lost and I can’t sleep. I want to stay here.”

After Cheng *popo* passed the microphone back to the tour guide, he remarked with a tone of seriousness, “You have to understand, farmers are skilled workers (*zyun coi*). Farming is not something you can learn from books. Asking Cheng *popo* to wash dishes in the city would be a waste of her talents (*daai coi siu jung*)! We’ll fight till the end.”

Increasingly, the term “indigenous villagers” has become a trope for special rights, collusion between businessmen and officials, and greedy opportunists who see spaces as capitals. I once asked a non-indigenous villager who was also a member of the Land Justice League how to tell if a person is an indigenous villager. She first laughed at my naïve question, then answered vehemently: “It’s easy to tell. Indigenous villagers don’t farm! They’re just landlords! Non-indigenous villagers in the New Territories are second-class citizens. They have no money, no land, and no power (*moucin, moudei, moukyun*). Those ‘three-no’ people are non-indigenous villagers.”

The inferior status of non-indigenous villagers can be traced back to the colonial policy that privileged indigenous landlords, “as their support was crucial to consolidate the colonial rule in the pre-war period. Not being considered citizens in the villages, most migrant farmers had no land ownership and had to rent from indigenous landlords” (Ng et al. 2023, 8). According to the historians, “in the early 1950s, 61 per cent of the total agricultural acreage was cultivated by tenant rather than indigenous farmers and at least half of the total acreage was used to grow vegetables” (Ng et al. 2023, 8).

Of course, not all indigenous villagers endorsed the NENT Development Plan and certainly not all non-indigenous villagers wanted to continue to farm. I know of at least one person in each side whose opinion diverged from their fellow villagers. The indigenous and the non-indigenous villagers depicted here are not supposed to be an unquestionable representation of the two groups, but a narrative told by the land justice activists, some of whom are also keen environmentalists and green living practitioners.

At first glance, the activists appeared to protect the weak by campaigning against land injustice. However, as participants explained their reasons for joining the walking tour, a deeper motivation emerged. Especially for people who were not land activists, it became clear that what they sought to protect was not only villagers who had no money, no land, and no power; they took part in the walking tour because they wanted to defend their own rights—and their last chances—to live otherwise in Hong Kong. Because the possibility of living otherwise seemed feasible only in these New Territories villages, it was imperative to protect them from the encroachment of urban development.

A picture containing grass, sky, outdoor, field

Description automatically generated

**Figure** **4**: A vegetable farm in the New Territories.

## The aspiration to live otherwise

The expression of “living otherwise” (*lingjatzung* *sangwut fongsik*) is frequently brought up as an aspiration by my interlocutors in relation to green living, urbanization, rural living, and the future of agriculture in Hong Kong. During our walking tour, this aspiration stood out as we approached the border between Hong Kong and Shenzhen. There, our tour guide pulled out a scroll from his backpack. As he held one end and a non-indigenous villager held the other, they unveiled a large landscape photograph.

Pointing northward, the tour guide said, “You see? That is Shenzhen.”

The spring fog was so heavy that we couldn’t see anything from where we stood.

“Here. Look.” He then directed our attention to the panoramic skyline in the photo. “This skyline is Shenzhen, and the expansive green space is Hong Kong. Surprising, isn’t it?”

The panoramic photograph was a work of art by Hong Kong photographer John Choy, taken at the Robin’s Nest in Northeast New Territories. The contrast between the dense skyline of Shenzhen and the vast green space of Hong Kong challenges the preconceived notion of Hong Kong as urban and China as predominantly rural.

A city in the distance

Description automatically generated

**Figure 5:** Urban Shenzhen and rural Hong Kong by John Choy.

“Let the skyscrapers stay in Shenzhen!” a non-indigenous villager exclaimed, “We don’t need another Central in the New Territories! Our village lifestyle cannot be bought with money. No matter how much they compensate us, we won’t back down! Our Alliance’s demand is clear: “No Relocation! No Demolition (*bat cin bat caak*)!”

But why? Central is often viewed as the heart of Hong Kong. It housed the government headquarters during colonial times and is now home to numerous international businesses and consulates-general. For many outsiders, Central *is* Hong Kong. It is a symbol of wealth, power, and success. It has its own logic, its own rhythm, and its own set of values—one that was aptly termed by Taiwanese author Lung Ying-tai as the “Central’s values” (*zung waan gaa zik*):

Central is emblematic of Hong Kong, and the values it embodies are seen as Hong Kong’s core principles. The “Central value” is driven by capitalist logic. It celebrates the pursuit of personal wealth. It believes that competition leads to progress. It uses economy, wealth creation, efficiency, development, and globalization as indicators of societal advancement…Unfortunately, Central’s values have also come to overshadow other values in the city (Lung 2004).

If living in Central is the “dominant, and dominating, modes of being” (Povinelli 2011, 1), then living in the villages in the New Territories embodies what my green friends describe as “living otherwise.” Thus, preserving the farmlands in the New Territories is in effect defending a way of living in Hong Kong. This sentiment was further illuminated during our interactions with the local community. After the tour, we were invited to visit other villagers and enjoyed the traditional Hakka savory cakes and sweet herbal tea that they had prepared for us. As we ate, several non-indigenous villagers took to the stage, voicing the abovementioned view:

Why can’t we live this way? Why don’t they let me farm?

Why must everyone in Hong Kong work in finance and real estate?

Do Hongkongers really have no choices in our destiny?

When the speeches concluded, the tour guide finally had time to join our table for some Hakka cakes and tea. After I expressed gratitude for the insightful tour, he shrugged off the compliment and said:

I’m glad you appreciated the tour, but you’re definitely in the minority. Most Hong Kong people are pro-development. As soon as the government says a development plan will address the housing crisis, many accept it without a second thought, bypassing any discussion about the value of villages and agriculture.

The biggest myth in Hong Kong is that there are too many people but a scarcity of land (*dei siu jan do*). This is the bullshit instilled in us since we were kids. We are brainwashed to believe that land shortage is the root of the housing crisis. Once you buy into that, you’ll support initiatives to move mountains and reclaim land (*ji saan tin hoi*) for housing, ready to sacrifice everything for more houses.[[25]](#footnote-25)

The other misconception is that only finance adds value to Hong Kong. That’s far from the truth. We organize this walking tour not just to defend the farmers here, but also to emphasize the importance of farming and village life. We want to illustrate alternatives—there are other ways to live.

## Reimagine Hong Kong with a village mindset

Before our departure, the local villagers handed each of us a copy of the New Territories DistrictPost. The issue featured the story of Mr. Young,a non-indigenous villager who endured a three-hour daily commute from his home in the New Territories to his workplace in Central. In the interview, Mr. Young reflected:

In the city, there’s a disconnection—between people and nature. Many spend their entire day inside offices. When they do go out, they either walk through underground tunnels or sheltered pedestrian footbridges. They aren’t exposed to the sun or the rain. Living in the village is a very different experience. Every evening as I make my way back from Central, I feel a deep connection with both the people and nature. It feels like I’m breathing in sync with the sky and the Earth.

In this emerging discourse around village life, the village was celebrated as a haven where the relationships between nature, humans, and other beings are cherished. While there was a tendency among the green people to romanticize rural life, they insisted that their return to villages was not to “escape the world” but to “find an alternative lifestyle” within Hong Kong. This narrative was especially widespread in youth and student magazines, in which the village (*cyun*) is not simply perceived as a fixed location where the utopia resides, but more as amindset and a symbolic and ideological space where values that are at odds with the mainstream values are accepted. When the village is conceptualized as such, itenables the urbanites to reimagine Hong Kong with what I call the “village mindset”, which came to the fore during the Umbrella Movement in 2014.

About a month into the Umbrella Movement, some street occupiers began referring to themselves as “villagers” (*cyun man*) and their occupying sites “villages” (Chow 2019, 37). The site on Harcourt Road, an artery in the Admiralty business district, was named “Harcourt Village”. It remained unclear how “the village” had entered the vocabulary of the social movement. Even the occupiers could not pinpoint its inception. But I am inclined to think that it was inspired by the green people’s pursuit of living a sustainable and self-sufficient life in New Territories’ villages. For example, occupiers set up a self-sustaining mutual aid community on Harcourt Road, which included first-aid stations, teach-in and study areas, recycling stations, self-organized security patrols, free food kitchens, and an improvised allotment garden for occupiers to grow organic vegetables. Also, tents were given distinct addresses, such as “Harcourt Village no. 3”, and postal workers were able to deliver mail to a correspondent’s address in the occupied community (Chow 2019, 37-38).

The Harcourt Village is perhaps the most prominent illustration of how Hongkongers have reimagined their city through the village mindset. However, prior to the advent of the Harcourt Village, the green people had been forging their own green living communities in urban and rural Hong Kong. In the next section, I detail the origins of the green community’s inspiration and how it facilitated the reimagination of Hong Kong with a village mindset.

**The ethics and aesthetics of green living**

Green living in Hong Kong draws inspiration from sustainable practices in the West and in nearby East and Southeast Asian countries. However, the ethics and aesthetics that underpin most of the green living communities in Hong Kong come from three main sources: Naoki Shiomi’s concept of “Half Farmer, Half X”; the philosophy and practice of permaculture; and the vision of a circular economy anchored in rural-urban symbiosis.

The Japanese author Naoki Shiomi was the first to introduce the concept of “Half-farmer, Half-X”, or *hanno-han X* in Japanese (Shiomi 2006). According to Shiomi, being a “half-farmer” entails growing one’s own food to increase food self-sufficiency, even if it is just by a small percentage. If cultivating crops in a field is not feasible, urban spaces like balconies, patios, and rooftops should be repurposed for community vegetable gardens. While Shiomi underscores the importance of food self-sufficiency, he believes the act of growing one’s own food serves deeper purposes. He asserts that through organic farming, people can learn to let go of the desire to control and live in accordance with nature. Shiomi sees this as a fundamental shift in mindset required to tackle the current social and environmental crisis.

The “Half-X” in Shiomi’s concept involves utilizing one’s talent to the fullest. In this context, X represents the point at which an individual intersects with society. “Half X” emphasizes the need to restore a dignified connection between the two. This dignity stems from contributing to society by making the most of one’s abilities. For instance, an individual who excels in art can use their skills to beautify community spaces with mural and artworks, earning a modest income in the process. However, since pursuing one’s X may not always be financially viable, Shiomi proposes that individuals become “half-farmers” to ensure a certain level of food self-sufficiency. In doing so, they can retain their dignity and contribute to society in a meaningful way.

If Half-farmer, Half-X is the philosophical ideal for building a new green world, permaculture (*wing zuk zoi pui*) provides the method to realize it. Permaculture was originally developed in Australia in the 1970s by Bill Mollison and David Holmgren. It was conceived in response to concerns about unsustainable agricultural practices and the negative impacts of industrialization on the environment. Mollison and Holmgren’s goal was to design a sustainable agricultural system that mimicked the diversity, stability, and resilience of natural ecosystems. Since then, permaculture has spread globally and is now adopted in many countries around the world.

Since permaculture was introduced in Hong Kong in the early 2000s, it has become hugely popular among the green people, who have applied its ethics in building their own eco-communities. The ethics of permaculture are based on three core tenets: care of the Earth, care of people, and care through fair share. In practice, it means cooperating with nature by designing regenerative, self-sustaining, and equitable ecosystems that cater to both human and non-human needs. Together, these principles provide a framework for creating sustainable, regenerative systems that promote the health and well-being of the Earth and all its inhabitants.

Like the Half-farmer, Half-X model, permaculture is not about living in reclusion in the countryside, but a new way of relating to nature and society. As a permaculture teacher reminded me, “Permaculture is not only about designing the best farm or the nicest garden. Permaculture is also about people. A practitioner of permaculture would ask: What kind of agricultural or ecological design would respect the law of nature while enhancing the relationships between people and other beings?”

Such relational ethics have also given rise to new relational aesthetics, which prioritize the connectivity of a design over its appearance and materials. This shift in aesthetics was not only visible in personal styles and mannerisms, but also in the way some professionals—especially designers, architects, and artists—approached their work. Alex, a “Half-farmer, Half-designer”, noted that the second principle of permaculture (care of people) has had a profound impact on his approach to green and sustainable design. He illustrated his points with the water bottle in his hand.

Making water bottles with biodegradable materials is not enough. A green designer should also consider the social relations and social impacts of the bottle. How will it change people’s everyday life and their relationships with others? For some designers, causing no harm qualifies as “green*.*” Yet, green design should have more to offer. We not only want our designs to mitigate waste and pollution, but we also want them to be socially engaging. When you engage people with your green design, you’re directing them towards a greener life.

As a “half-farmer, half-designer,” organic farming has also introduced Alex to a new aesthetics that values spontaneity[[26]](#footnote-26) and improvisation. Reflecting on his early transition to sustainable design, he spoke of the time he invested in ensuring his designs were both green and appealing. “I didn’t want to compromise,” Alex said. But as time passed, he realized that seeing it as a “compromise” was wrong. As he put it, “Just because a design doesn’t fit mainstream aesthetics doesn’t mean it lacks beauty. It has its own unique charm.”

The mainstream aesthetics, Alex said, was obsessed with a kind of minimalism that is luxurious and sleek. Although green living also endorses minimalism and simplicity, their meanings are fundamentally different. “The simplicity or minimalism in the design world requires a lot of human efforts and natural resources. What I find most troubling is that certain designers would blindly pursue such simplicity. They might seek out a particular metal to achieve a specific minimalist look, regardless of its environmental and social costs.

Contrary to this precision approach, Alex’s experience with organic farming taught him to accept the way things are and to appreciate “how things unfold organically”:

You asked me how organic farming has influenced me. I think I’m most inspired by the idea of “organic”. Organic vegetables might have blemishes and their shapes might not be as uniform as conventional vegetables (*soeng kwai coi*), but they’re perfectly imperfect. When you blindly pursue a certain look, you’ll miss out on other worthwhile alternatives. Simplicity shouldn’t just be an outcome. It should be the way you approach things, a philosophy that guides your work.

Alex’s reflection on imperfect produce resonates with many green people. Upon realizing that the so-called “ugly” fruits and vegetables get discarded because they don’t conform to consumers’ aesthetic standards, the green community campaigned to rescue this perfectly edible produce. They also questioned the ethics of exclusively consuming specific vegetables, especially those out of season or not locally grown. Growing a singular crop type or cultivating food out of season often demands alternative techniques, practices, and occasionally chemicals to mimic natural conditions, compensating for the absence of sunlight, temperature, and humidity. Moreover, consuming imported vegetables also adds to food miles.

In Hong Kong, staple vegetables such as *baak coi*, *coi sam*, and *saang coi* are typically imported from China and are available year-round. Most Hong Kong families eat them daily. If grown locally, these vegetables are in season during the winter and early spring. However, many green people have stopped eating them since learning about farming, stating that “it’s not normal to be able to eat *coi sam* regardless of the seasons.” On another occasion, an interlocutor told me that she began eating *jau mak coi* only after attending a leisure farming course. She believed that *jau mak coi* is safer than *coi sam* because for *coi sam* to grow out of season, farmers often need to apply a high dose of pesticides.

Thanks to the growing appetite for eating seasonally (*bat si bat sik*), staple vegetables like *baak coi*, *coi sam*, and *saang coi* have given way to less refined and more rustic vegetables like *jau mak coi*, *zyu naa coi*, and *faan syu jip* in the green living community. As Cheng *popo* explained during our visit to her farm: “In the past, Hongkongers didn’t like these rustic vegetables because farmers fed themto geese and pigs. Eating them was considered demeaning. These rustic vegetables only gained popularity in the last six or seven years due to the high demand for locally-grown organic vegetables. But they are still rare on restaurant menus as connoisseurs consider them too rustic.”

The increasing demand for locally grown vegetables has sparked the Agricultural Revitalization Movement, which I will explore in more detail in the next chapter. One of the aims of this movement is to promote the idea of “urban-rural symbiosis” (*sing hoeng gung saang*). In Hong Kong, urban-rural symbiosis refers to the interaction and cooperation between urban and rural areas, with the goal of enhancing food safety and security, reducing food waste and environmental pollution, and promoting economic and social development in both urban and rural communities. In the final sections, I will illustrate how two village-based communities have incorporated and adapted the emerging ethics and aesthetics of green living to build their green new world in Hong Kong.

**Building a green new world**

***Mapopo Community Farm at Ma Shi Po, New Territories***

Ma Shi Po village was once known for its fertile farmlands. However, since the indigenous villagers sold their lands to real estate developers, many Ma Shi Po farmers were forced to leave their homes. To help the remaining farmers fight against the Northeast New Territories Development Plan, a group of activists collaborated with six non-indigenous farmers from the villages and three new farmers from the city to establish Mapopo Community Farm in the summer of 2010. The farm’s primary goals were to halt urban sprawl and promote a sustainable development model allowing the co-existence of the urban and rural areas, a vision referred to as “urban-rural symbiosis” (*senghoeng gungsaang*).

Mapopo Community Farm sought to build a mutual support network between the city and the villages in the New Territories, emphasizing food waste recycling and local food supply.

For instance, Mapopo’s farmers regularly collected soybean pulp, fish bones, tea leaves, eggshells, and other food waste from local cafes and restaurants, turning them into compost for the farm. It was estimated that Mapopo Community Farm recycled two to three tons of food waste in Fanling North every month. The green community argued that if all Hong Kong farms adopted Mapopo’s initiative, they could potentially prevent 4% of the total food waste from going to landfills.

Mapopo’s vision of urban-rural symbiosis also involved the creation of a circular network of local food supply. The weekly farmer’s market not only gave city dwellers the opportunity to buy fresh local produce at an affordable price, but it also provided a space for them to get to know the farmers who grew their food. The connection between farmers and their customers was a vital component of the green people’s vision of urban-rural symbiosis. Their connection not only expanded the farmers’ customer base but also built trust, eliminating the need for costly organic certifications, which would impose an economic burden on the farmers. Within the green living circle, there was a consensus that locally grown vegetables were morally superior to certified organic ones from abroad because they support local farmers. As one Mapopo customer reasoned, “If I had to choose between organic vegetables from an upscale supermarket and uncertified vegetables from a known farmer, I’d choose the latter without reservation. Even though their vegetables might not be 100% organic, I know I am supporting their livelihood.”

Although Mapopo did not keep a record of their customers’ demographics, the farmers told me that not all of their customers lived nearby. Emily, a loyal customer of the farm, lived in Tseung Kwan O and it took her 1.5 hours to travel to Ma Shi Po village by bus. Despite the distance, she still made an effort to come every week. “I buy from the farmers here because I enjoy the whole process. It’s full of human warmth and connection (*jan cing mei*),” Hearing Emily’s comment, a farmer proudly chimed in, “Here at Mapopo, we not only grow sustainable organic vegetables, but we also cultivate long-lost human warmth and connection (*jan cing mei*).”

When Emily first came to Mapopo, she was surprised to learn that it was still possible to have farm-to-table vegetables in an urban jungle like Hong Kong. But that was not the only reason she supported the revitalization of local agriculture. As she got to know the farmers and listened to their accounts of why they wanted to remain in their villages, Emily realized that it was no longer just a matter of whether people could eat organic vegetables or not:

Although the development plan doesn’t affect me directly, I think it is inhumane to evict the farmers from their homes and grab their lands for development. The villagers and farmers here are not after big money. They just want to retain their way of life in the village. I think people should have the choice to live the way they want. We shouldn’t deprive people of their freedom to live differently.

With farming no longer seen as a backward or soiled occupation, more and more young people have moved to the countryside to become part-time or full-time farmers. For these people, being able to live as a farmer indicated that it was still possible to live otherwise in Hong Kong, which is something to be treasured. As one young farmer put it, “I am not suggesting that everyone should become a farmer. It’s not for everyone. But people should be allowed to choose their own paths and follow a way of life that’s most suitable for them.”

Unlike many community organizations in Hong Kong, Mapopo Community Farm operated without government funding. To ensure self-sufficiency, the farm generated income from selling vegetables at the weekly farmer’s market, offering permaculture classes, conducting guided walking tours, and hosting diverse makers/DIY workshops for the public. Through these activities, Mapopo guides individuals in their transformation from mere consumers to active producers, promoting a maker culture and enhancing people’s self-reliance.

### **The land nurturers’ movement and their eco-village PEACE in Nam Chung, New Territories**

### Surrounded by Pat Sin Leng (literally the “ridge of the eight immortals”), Nam Chung is a rural area in northeast New Territories that sits quietly along the tranquil Starling Inlet. It’s an ecological heaven for humans, Egrets, and other migrating birds from the north. But Nam Chung was not always a haven for these birds. After the government diverted the water source to a reservoir in the 1960s, there wasn’t enough water in the fields for rice cultivation. Consequently, farmers converted their paddy fields into fishponds. With the decline of Hong Kong’s fishing industry, farmers were forced to leave their villages for employment in the city. The abandoned fishponds gradually transformed into expansive wetlands and mangroves, attracting even more wildlife.

Although Nam Chung was not targeted for development during my fieldwork in 2012 and 2013, its proximity to Ma Shi Po and the precedent set by the destruction of Choi Yuen village for a high-speed rail project in 2009 underscored a looming threat posed by the Northeast New Territories Development Plan (Chow 2023). When the green people discovered that someone had secretly dumped debris into the fishponds in Nam Chung, they became extremely concerned for the future of this beautiful countryside and decided to take action. In 2009, following a lawyer’s advice, over 100 individuals established the Hong Kong Sustainable Agriculture Association (HKSAA). Members of HKSAA, who referred to themselves as land nurturers (*joeng dei jan*), hailed from diverse backgrounds. The most active participants included teachers, social activists, housewives, artists, full-time and part-time farmers, students, and environmentalists. Through crowdfunding (a minimum of 200 HKD/26 USD per person a month), the land nurturers adopted a small plot of farmland (4000 square feet) and rented 110 *dou* of fishponds (approximately 1100 litres) from the indigenous villagers in Nam Chung.[[27]](#footnote-27) Their goal was to build the first eco-village in Hong Kong through what they called a land nurturing or land adoption movement (*joengdei wandung*).

### Since the farmlands and fishponds were co-owned by decedents of five different indigenous clans (the Yeung, the Cheng, the Lo, the Cheung, and the Lei), the land nurturers had to negotiate and communicate with each landowner directly. It was a challenging and time-consuming process because many of the indigenous descendants did not reside in Hong Kong. As a result, it took the land nurturers several years to complete the deal. The Nam Chung case demonstrated that even though farmers and indigenous villagers are often depicted as adversaries, indigenous villagers are not a homogenous group of pro-development opportunists. In this exceptional case, being able to safeguard and preserve their ancestral lands was significant for indigenous descendants who lived overseas.

In March 2013, HKSAA became a non-profit organization and renamed the Partnership for Eco-Agriculture and Conservation of Earth (PEACE). It’s worth noting that their English name does not quite capture their eco-dream, which is better reflected in their Chinese name: Association of Living, Farming, and Building Through Land Conservation (*wut ganng gin joengdei hipwui*). This name provides deeper insight into the land nurturers’ vision for an eco-village in Hong Kong. Inspired by permaculture and other eco-communities worldwide, the land nurturers aimed not only to promote ecological sustainability through education and farming (Chow 2023), but also to create a community akin to a “commune” where like-minded individuals can live together and support each other. This vision was further elaborated by Yingling, one of the land nurturers, when sharing her experience of living in an eco-village in Thailand:

I lived in this eco-village in Thailand that served two meals a day, so you didn’t have to worry about cooking or eating alone. Isn’t it wonderful? They even had their own schools and clinics in the village, which provided so much support from the community. Honestly, I’d only consider having a kid if I could live in a place like that because in Hong Kong, there’s no sense of community, creating many social and ecological problems. Do we really need to have a washing machine, a vacuum, or a car in every household? Before going to the eco-village, I’d never even heard of a commune, but I truly believe that it is good for both people and the environment.

Although the land nurturers in Hong Kong frequently used loaded terms like communal meals (*daai wok faan*) and production brigade (*sang caan deoi*), they made no references to socialism or the communal kitchens and collectives in communist China. For Yingling, even though Hong Kong is geographically closer to China, her knowledge of the commune came from her experience in Thailand.

Yingling’s “disconnection” from China has roots in the Cold War dynamics in Hong Kong. Cultural studies scholar Wing-sun Law posits that after World War II, the Cold War transformed Hong Kong into a distinctive free zone between the Chinese Communist Party and the Nationalist Party of China (KMT), giving rise to a rich cultural and media landscape. Nonetheless, the Cold War-infused narratives gradually alienated locally-born generations such as Yingling. With no direct experience of China, their knowledge of the nation came from political propaganda. The stark portrayals of China as either a Socialist Utopia or an evil Communist state left many in Hong Kong feeling out of touch. This disconnection, compounded by the reality of living under an undemocratic colonial administration, deepened feelings of confusion and cynicism, both of which contributed to the “political apathy” of Hong Kong people (Law 2020, 99). Over time, these Hongkongers began to prioritize the economy over politics, molding their identity into that of Homo economicus (Law 2020, 202). This paradigm was challenged for the first time by Millennials—also known as the post-80s youth in Hong Kong—as evident in their involvement in the green and anti-development movements (Lam-Knott 2018).

When I did my fieldwork in 2013, it was clear that the Land Nurturers’ Movement was still in its infancy and their eco-village a work-in-progress. But according to Kootyin Chow, a friend and anthropology student at CUHK who went on to study and live in the eco-village in Nam Chung, Yingling’s dream of fostering a sense of togetherness through communal dining and farm-to-table experiences came true: “In the subsequent years, the risk of immediate destruction and large-scale development in Nam Chung seemed less likely. The movement’s founders decided to take a step forward by actively creating the Hong Kong ecovillage now known as PEACE” (Chow 2023).

Ten years since its inception, PEACE has grown and evolved into a thriving eco-village—the only known active eco-village project in Hong Kong. As Chow wrote in her recent article, there are currently eight core members in the eco-village. Some, like Chow, live near the farmstead, while others commute from farther away. Each eco-village member is responsible for a different aspect of the community’s work, but all share a common passion for growing and preparing sustainable and tasty food. At the heart of PEACE’s collective efforts is a small yet thriving organic vegetable garden that serves as a community garden for members. The garden is home to a variety of seasonal vegetables and perennial subtropical plants, such as bananas, tapioca, taro, Cajun beans, pineapples, guavas, longan, and lychee, among others. The plants are arranged in rows of raised beds, with taller ones planted next to more shade-tolerant, ground-level crops, creating a harmonious and diverse ecosystem (Chow 2023).

In addition to growing food, PEACE has continued to cultivate and expand the network of farmers, local food producers, and consumers through various community-supported agriculture (CSA) projects in Hong Kong. Chow has detailed PEACE’s latest turnips project in her article (Chow 2023). However, when I was there ten years ago, the land nurturers were experimenting with a different crop: the lotus.

Since taking over areas of land and ponds in Nam Chung, the land nurturers have transformed the once-abandoned fishponds into a beautiful landscape filled with lotus flowers. The lotus flowers were not only grown for appreciation, but they were also grown for their food. In China, lotus is known for its incredible versatility. Its petals, leaves, stems, and seeds are all edible and have medicinal benefits. After a summer of magnificent lotus blossoms, by late August, the pink flowers have quietly retreated into green seedpods, awaiting harvest. Once harvested, the land nurturers would sell the lotus seeds (*lin zi*) to various producers, distributors, or retailers specializing in local organic foods.

### **Connecting your X to community economies**

Tou Zok Fong, a social enterprise based in Wan Chai, has been a loyal customer of Nam Chung’s lotus seeds. Founded in 2008, Tou Zok Fong aimed to promote environmental sustainability and improve the economic condition of farmers and working-class people. They did this by endorsing Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) and revitalizing community economies (*se keoi ging zai*). To foster urban-rural symbiosis and to support Nam Chung’s land conservation movement, Tou Zok Fong purchased a large quantity of lotus seeds from Nam Chung every autumn. These seeds were then utilized to craft their unique brand of mooncakes, a traditional treat for the Mid-Autumn Festival.

Inspired by Naoki Shiomi’s concept of dedicating one’s talents and skills to benefit local communities, Tou Zok Fong transformed the domestic abilities of housewives into valuable economic assets for the Wan Chai community. The organization firmly believes that a powerful way to restore working-class people’s dignity is to empower them to connect their “X” to their community economies.

Thus, every aspect of the mooncake production process, from extracting the seeds from the seedpods to creating the lotus seed puree, was meticulously done by hand by the housewives of Wan Chai. They joined Tou Zok Fong through a community mutual aid project that sought to revitalize Wan Chai’s community’s economy and improve the wellbeing of low-income families.[[28]](#footnote-28)

In addition to mooncakes, the women at Tou Zok Fong had also crafted a variety of other delicacies using locally sourced farm produce, including zongzi, turnip cake, roselle jam, mushroom sauce, and chili sauce. Tou Zok Fong’s decision to specialize in the production of traditional Chinese delicacies was threefold. Firstly, processed food holds greater economic value compared to the net sale of fresh produce, making it a financially sustainable investment for an NGO. Secondly, Tou Zok Fong aimed to instill a sense of pride in the housewives, recognizing their skills, talent, and knowledge of home cooking in an era dominated by fast food and international processed food giants. Last but not least, they aspired to provide the community with access to healthier processed food produced locally.

To further enhance the connection between individuals and their communities, Tou Zhok Fong introduced the concept of Time Vouchers (*si fan gyun*) as an alternative currency, which used time instead of money as the basis of exchange. The Time Vouchers come in five denominations: 1 *si fan* representing 1 minute of labor, 5 *si fan* for 5 minutes, 10 *si fan* for 10 minutes, 30 *si fan* for 30 minutes, and 60 *si fan* for 60 minutes.

Individuals can earn Time Vouchers from Tou Zhok Fong by offering their skills and expertise within their communities. These skills could be anything, from teaching English to providing haircuts for the elderly. The principle of this system is straightforward: the time one dedicates to these services is reciprocated with equivalent Time Vouchers. For example, an hour spent tutoring earns the same in Time Vouchers (60 *si fan*) as an hour spent making mooncakes. The intent behind the Time Voucher system is to counter the exploitation seen in the capitalist economy, where many work extensive hours but receive insufficient pay. The system envisions a more equitable economy, one that honors not just the environment, but also the producers, and cultivates individual talents (their “X”) within their communities.

However, it is important to note that Time Vouchers can only be used at Tou Zhok Fong’s grocery shop and nowhere else in Hong Kong. Here’s how it functions: If a customer wishes to purchase a jar of ginger candies typically priced at 28 HKD for 100g, with a 6-minute Time Voucher, the cost is reduced to just 22 HKD.

**Relearning how to relate**

Opinions about the indigenous villagers in the New Territories have undergone some significant changes. Once revered for their “glorious and ancient” heritage (Watson and Watson 2004), the indigenous villagers are now seen by many Hongkongers as greedy opportunists. Hau Chi-Keung, a controversial figure from the Rural Committee, once declared to the media his willingness to sell his ancestral hall to developers, provided that the price was right. While Hau’s stance does not represent the sentiments of all indigenous villagers, it does epitomize a growth-centric mindset that values economic progress above all else.

The green people, on the other hand, have a very different vision. Drawing inspiration from the ethics and aesthetics of village life, they cherish communal bonds, mutual support, simplicity, and the deep connection between humanity and nature. The tension between these two perspectives is evident in the disputes between indigenous and non-indigenous villagers in the New Territories. Despite years of mutually beneficial relationships, the indigenous villagers betrayed the non-indigenous villagers for financial incentives.

Through this and earlier chapters, I’ve highlighted the significance of relationality in Hong Kong’s green living movement. At its core, green living teaches us to rediscover and redefine our relationships with ourselves, others, nature, and the “local soil”—the land that people call home. In the next chapter, I will examine how such “relational reflexivity” (Flynn and Tinius, 2015), combined with growing concerns about food safety and security, has catalyzed the Agricultural Revitalization Movement. This movement aims to rejuvenate not just agriculture, but all things local (*buntou*).

***6.******Revitalize the Local Soil***

“Don’t give me contaminated vegetables from mainland China. I want clean vegetables from the New Territories!”

A headline from the *New Territories District Post*, January 2013

In 2011, Friends of the Earth published a report that placed Hong Kong as the eighth most polluted metropolis worldwide in terms of air quality. Meanwhile in China, the documentary film “Under the Dome” sparked fervent debate concerning China’s air pollution crisis. Interestingly, amidst these developments, the topic of air pollution seldom found its way into the everyday conversations among ordinary residents of Hong Kong. As Timothy Choy noted during his fieldwork in the 1990s, individuals who expressed the strongest criticism of Hong Kong’s air quality were predominantly expatriate businesspeople from the United States (Choy 2011, 141). If air pollution was not the foremost concern for Hong Kong residents, which type of pollution captivated their attention?

In this final chapter, I show that it was actually “pollution by Red China” (*cek faa*), also known as “mainlandization” (*daai luk faa*), that many Hong Kong people found troubling. A decade after Hong Kong’s handover to China, the incessant disputes between Hong Kong and Chinese citizens (*zung gong maau teon*) had fuelled fears and anxieties about being “polluted” by the mainland, sparking a surge of local consciousness (*bun tou ji sik*) and giving rise to a variety of localist movements (Chen and Szeto 2015; Veg 2017; Kaeding 2017; Lam and Cooper 2017; Yuen and Chung 2018). These movements spanned a wide spectrum, from right-wing resistance against Chinese immigration to left-wing advocacy for the restoration of social and environmental justice through community building, local economies, and the Agricultural Revitalisation Movement. Despite their differences, the core of Hong Kong’s localism was driven by the desire for greater personal, political, and economic autonomy, as well as concerns about the endangerment of Hong Kong’s uniqueness (Choy 2011) due to eroding borders and the decline of its economic miracles (Ip 2020). This was exacerbated by a number of large cross-border infrastructural projects, viewed by some Hong Kong people as forceful integration orchestrated by the Hong Kong and Chinese central governments.

During this surge of localism in Hong Kong, many green people championed the revitalization of the “local soil” (*bun tou*) as a strategy to enhance Hong Kong’s self-sufficiency in agricultural food production (Ho 2019), thereby securing greater freedom and autonomy. This movement was further provoked by increasing concerns about food security, which were intensified by a series of food safety incidents in mainland China. The Agricultural Revitalization Movement underscores that more than ever before, the green and the environmental are simultaneously social and political.

**The threat of unruly bodies**

By the early 2010s, the fusion of environmental pollution and the so-called “political pollution” had become so pronounced that discussions centered on mainlandization often eclipsed other concerns, including environmental issues. Environmental issues intersecting with the debate on mainlandization were more likely to capture wider public and media attention. Although environmental issues were not top of mind for many Hong Kong people, they frequently articulated their political views using potent environmental metaphors, either consciously or unconsciously. For instance, because many Hong Kong people perceived China and the Chinese people as threats to Hong Kong, in 2012, some right-wing netizens termed the influx of Chinese immigrants and tourists as a “locust infestation” (Ip 2015; Rowen 2016; Ong and Lin 2017). The tourist influx began after the SARS epidemic in 2003. To expedite economic recovery after the epidemic, the Hong Kong government and the PRC signed the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) and rolled out the Individual Visit Scheme (*zi jau hang*). While CEPA aimed to foster enhanced trade and joint investment between Hong Kong and China, the Individual Visit Scheme was designed to provide a quick boost to Hong Kong’s retail sector by enabling mainland visitors to travel to Hong Kong on an individual tour visa, rather than as part of a tour group. This closer integration initially proved popular among the Hong Kong people, as within months, Hong Kong was transformed from a desolate ghost town back to its familiar bustling metropolis. As a result, many Hong Kong people accepted that the city needed to board China’s “economic high-speed train” and that it was the only path towards sustained prosperity (quoting Ho-fung Hung in Kochien 2014). The early success of CEPA and IVS also gave the Hong Kong government the legitimacy needed to further integrate Hong Kong and China (*zung gong jung hap*) (Erni 2007, 47-48). Since the late 2000s, the government has embarked on a series of cross-border development projects. These include the construction of the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge, the Guangzhou–Shenzhen–Hong Kong Express Rail Link, and the urbanization of the northeast New Territories. These infrastructural developments triggered significant public scrutiny and ignited a series of conservation and anti-development movements spearheaded by the more radical environmental activists in the city (Ku 2012; Ng 2022; Chen and Szeto 2015).

While elites and business tycoons have profited from these integration plans, the benefits to ordinary Hongkongers remain elusive. Many Hongkongers complained that the integration has in fact undermined their economic standing. Opposition voices argued that “closer economic integration allows many wealthy Chinese to spend and hide their wealth in Hong Kong” (quoting Ho-fung Hung in Kochien 2014), thus driving up and inflating housing costs beyond the reach of locals.

The land activists in Hong Kong further argued that the integration agenda has essentially provided property developers with a carte blanche to exploit Hong Kong’s remaining rural farmland in the New Territories. The government’s real intention, they claimed, was to establish a “trans-border real estate market” (Graeber and Hui 2014) catering to China’s affluent class. According to the activist group Land Justice League, the Northeast New Territories Plan threatened to demolish over ten villages in Kwu Tung North, Fanling North, and Ta Kwu Leng/Ping Che. As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, this would displace nearly ten thousand villagers. Most of these villagers are elderly farmers with no other means of livelihood. Most importantly, contrary to the government’s assertion that the plan aims to alleviate Hong Kong’s housing shortage, the land activists discovered that the development primarily consists of luxury condos targeting wealthy mainland Chinese, not the promised social housing.

Although the Individual Visit Scheme provided an economic uplift following the SARS epidemic, it subsequently led to the homogenization of Hong Kong’s commercial landscape, turning the city into a shopping destination overrun by tourist-oriented retail chains. Unfortunately, many small local businesses fell prey to this new economic dynamic that favored these chains and were subsequently driven out of business due to skyrocketing rents (Graeber and Hui, 2014).

Since the launch of the Individual Visit Scheme in 2003, Hong Kong’s public spaces have been increasingly crowded with mainland tourists, forging a palpable resentment towards Hong Kong’s gradual integration with China. One incident that encapsulates the growing tension occurred during a meet-up I arranged with an interlocutor called Joey. We were meeting at a food court in Sha Tin and our table was a chair short, so Joey approached two Chinese tourists sitting nearby because their shopping bags were occupying an otherwise empty chair. Joey politely asked if we could use the chair. To our surprise, they refused. Visibly upset, Joey complained to the food court manager about how “Chinese tourists bullied us Hongkongers.” The manager was reluctant to offend anyone, so nothing came of it.

This incident is a clear illustration of the escalating tensions between Hong Kong residents and mainland Chinese visitors. Hongkongers often accuse Chinese tourists of exhibiting “uncivilized behaviors” and “a sense of entitlement” (*jan zyu sam taai*), while Chinese visitors frequently bemoan what they perceive as “condescension” and “intolerance from their hosts.” Reacting to such growing resentment, around 2011 and 2012, some right-wing netizens instigated an anti-Chinese campaign, derisively labeling mainland Chinese as “locusts” (*wong cung*) and their arrival in Hong Kong as a “locust infestation” (*wong wo*) (Ip 2015; Rowen 2016; Ong and Lin 2017). In this metaphorical context, a “locust” is not merely an insect, but “an unwelcome invader exploiting and taking advantage of a city, while refusing to contribute”—a quote taken from an online forum discussion.

The “locust infestation” is merely one of the many instances where Hong Kong people employed environmental metaphors as political commentary. Although my interlocutors disapproved of the use of derogatory metaphors and never used them during our conversations, they all expressed unease about China’s increasing interference and its impact on Hong Kong’s political, economic, and media ecology. They were also frustrated about the unruly situation stemming from frequent cross-border interactions. Here I think Mei Zhan’s notion of “unruly bodies” can help illuminate the kind of fear and anxieties that many Hong Kong people have about these trans-local encounters, highlighting how “boundaries of nature and culture, human and nonhuman, tradition and modernity, local and global are produced, contested, and reconfigured” (Zhan 2005, 33). Apart from tourism, diseases such as Avian Flu, SARS, and COVID-19 all intensified people’s concerns about the “biosecurity risk” that emerged from frequent cross-border movements (Erni 2007). Many in Hong Kong continued to blame mainland Chinese for bringing and spreading SARS and COVID-19 in Hong Kong. As some of my vegan interlocutors pointed out, “SARS crossed the border to Hong Kong because people in China have a taste for exotic wild animals. COVID-19 was first discovered in a Chinese wet market. The Chinese brought the virus to Hong Kong.” While no inflammatory metaphors were used, the insinuation was clear: Chinese bodies are viewed as unruly, and this perceived unruliness is contaminating the world (Zhan 2005).

**Toxic vegetables from China**

Among the pressing concerns that resonate deeply within the green living community in Hong Kong, food safety is at the forefront. While the rise of local consciousness has played a role in the Agricultural Revitalization Movement, the fear of contaminated food, especially vegetables from mainland China, has been a significant driving force. This sentiment is encapsulated by a headline from the New Territories District Post in January 2013: “Don’t give me contaminated vegetables from mainland China. I want clean vegetables from the New Territories!”

As food scandals in mainland China soar (Yan 2012), the people of Hong Kong grow increasingly apprehensive about their heavy dependence on China for food. Currently, Hong Kong sources 90% of its food from imports, with a significant proportion from the mainland. For instance, the mainland supplies 94% of Hong Kong’s fresh pork, 100% of its fresh beef, 100% of its live chicken, 92% of its vegetables, and 66% of its eggs. Despite a comprehensive food safety and quality control system by the Hong Kong government, these measures have not dispelled people’s fears of being poisoned or exposed to pesticide residues in vegetables and hormone residues in meat. Such fears were presented to me through anecdotes like the following during my fieldwork in 2012-2013:

When visiting a farm in mainland China, I thought it would be nice to buy some vegetables from the local farmers. My local friends’ response took me by surprise. “No way!” they exclaimed. “If you walk into the vegetable field, you’ll see that the water is as black as ink. That’s the chemical used to keep the vegetables large and green! The farmers have to wear special gloves to protect themselves from these chemicals. They wouldn’t eat these vegetables themselves, but these toxic vegetables (*duk coi*) are sold to Hong Kong!”

Stories like this may not be pure urban myth. Emerald Lake was born in a farming family in an inner province of China but moved to Hong Kong in the early 1990s after meeting her husband. She confided in me that it’s not rare for farmers in China to spray a mixture of water and laundry powder on Choi Sum to accelerate its growth and enhance its appearance. “I would steer clear of these toxic vegetables (*duk coi*),” she cautioned while demonstrating the use of baking soda and salt to remove chemical residues from the vegetables she had just purchased at the wet market.

In addition to the issue of toxic vegetables, fears surrounding contaminated meat have prompted many within the green living community to adopt vegetarianism or veganism as a safety measure against potential food poisoning. To these individuals, meat presents a greater problem than vegetables, because the contamination it carries cannot simply be washed away. As a biomedical toxicology student reasoned, “I feel safer being a vegetarian. Nowadays, pork and chicken are full of hormone residues. With vegetables, there is at least a chance to wash off the pesticides. With meat, the only recourse is abstinence.” Yang Yang’s family shared a similar reasoning. Initially, her family disapproved of her vegan lifestyle due to the perceived nutritional inadequacy of vegetables. But after she educated them about the ubiquitous use of growth hormones in poultry farming, their horror overruled their objections.

As apprehensions regarding toxic vegetables and meat escalated, demand for clean produce spurred a movement to rejuvenate local farming, pivoting it towards sustainable, organic agriculture (Cheng 2009). In January 2013, I participated in the inaugural Hong Kong Agriculture Forum (*hoeng gong nung jip leon taan*), the city’s first public conference dedicated to agricultural policy discussions. Titled “Agriculture is a Crucial Part of the City”, the event was hosted at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, attracting nearly 300 participants from diverse sectors. Following the main forum, the audience broke into smaller discussion groups to explore the various issues raised in the conference. Not surprisingly, food safety and contaminated vegetables from mainland China was a recurring topic. One participant lamented Hong Kong people’s growing indifference to the recurring food scares and their impact on low-income families, who had no choice but to eat cheap but potentially toxic vegetables due to their economic constraints. She said, “In poor areas like Sham Shui Po, you can buy two catty (*gan*) of toxic vegetables (*duk coi)* for 5 dollars or four cobs of sweetcorn for 10 dollars. Poor people eat these latent poisons (*maan sing duk joek*) every day. They have no choice. That’s all they can afford. It’s very sad, but our society does not seem to understand its severity.

Another participant was quick to point out that it was not only the poor who were eating these “latent poisons” (*maan sing duk joek*), it was a problem faced by all Hongkongers because even middle-class families couldn’t afford to eat organic vegetables every day. He and another participant then expressed concerns over the price volatility of imported food. The woman said, “The price of mainland vegetables fluctuates a lot whenever the weather is bad. If there are any natural or man-made disasters (*tin zoi jan wo*)—which is very likely to happen given climate change and the evolving political situation in the mainland —a catty of vegetables will cost you a thousand dollars. When that happened, would you still say agriculture is of no use to Hong Kong? Can finance and real estate save your life when there is not enough food?”

“I can’t agree more,” the male participant echoed, “That’s why we can’t depend solely on China for food supply. We need to have our own agriculture. Hong Kong’s over-reliance on mainland produce is making us very vulnerable to price fluctuation.”

Participants have also questioned the cost and benefit of using toxic fertilizers and pesticides. “While these chemicals help to keep the cost down, their residues may potentially cause harm to human health, and so there is a public health cost to it. Is it worth it?” “No,” one participant asserted, “It’s a ticking bomb!”

The discussion also covered the “cultural differences” between China and Hong Kong. For instance, a young man relayed a personal account of his brother who lived and worked in Shanghai. He said food safety wasn’t a major concern of his brother when he first relocated to China, though he soon realized that “food in China is not safe.” In contrast, his brother’s Shanghainese girlfriend was always skeptical of food made in China. “She always asked my brother to bring back essentials like soy sauce from Hong Kong. She also really wanted to move to Hong Kong. Why? Because our food is safe!”

As participants absorbed the various perspectives shared, a sense of resignation began to set in as they acknowledged the challenges of avoiding contaminated vegetables from mainland China. “It’s hard to avoid toxic vegetables unless you grow them yourself. There is nothing much we can do.” However, such pessimism was quickly overtaken by participants who have faith in Hong Kongers’ moral standards, as well as those who advocated for preserving Hong Kong’s remaining farmland. “I think eating in Hong Kong is generally safer than in China. Hong Kong businessmen are more ethical (*jau loeng sam*). If they know there is a problem, they won’t sell it. It’s not like that in mainland China. Even baby milk formula can be fake.” These words were met with approving nods from the audience. “That’s why we must preserve Hong Kong’s remaining farmland. Even if we don’t farm anymore, these lands can still serve as a physical barrier against pollutants from Shenzhen.”

**The rise and fall of Hong Kong’s local agriculture**

Contrary to the widespread view that Hong Kong was a barren island unsuitable for farming, the territory’s agriculture industry once thrived in the mid-twentieth century (Lau 2013, 65). Until the 1960s, farming was a crucial means of livelihood for both the indigenous villagers and Chinese refugees who escaped China to settle in the New Territories in the aftermath of World War II and the Chinese Civil War (Cheng 2009; Lau 2013, 56-57; Lou 2018).

Previously, scholars noted that agriculture was actively promoted by the colonial government to alleviate poverty and stabilize society after the wars. However, recent historical research has unveiled that this promotion was in fact a Cold War tactic intended to quell communist influence in rural Hong Kong and bolster the territory’s local food supply. As the historians point out, “soon after the PRC’s establishment on 1 October 1949, there had been widespread fear that the Communist regime would stop exporting vegetables to the colony” (Ng et al. 2023, 13). As part of a contingency plan, “the colonial government sought help from philanthropists and businessmen such as Lawrence and Horace Kadoorie, founders of Kadoorie Agricultural Aid Association, to teach and finance immigrants from China to raise pigs and poultry” (Ng et al. 2023, 13).

Working alongside the Agricultural and Fisheries Department, the KAAA not only provided funds but also launched various support programs for the Chinese refugees, such as helping them establish themselves as pig farmers and offering them interest-free or low-interest short-term loans. The Kadoorie brothers were staunch advocates of “helping people to help themselves” (Ng et al. 2023, 13). As a result, the primary goal of KAAA was to assist the new arrivals in becoming self-sufficient farmers. This initiative proved successful (Lou 2018, 176). As the Chinese refugees settled in their new homes and farms in the New Territories, they supplied an ever-growing percentage of the colony’s food (Hayes 2006, 29). “It appears that the earlier efforts of the colonial government to encourage local vegetable farming, improve local farmers’ standard of living, and cultivate a supportive rural network alleviated the strained condition of vegetable supply during the riots”, during which the leftists enacted a four-day food strike to stop all supplies of foodstuffs and commodities from mainland China (Ng et al. 2023, 26). Despite this, by the autumn of 1967, locally produced vegetables were already so plentiful that officials predicted “a definite possibility of over-supply in the near future” (Ng et al., 2023, 26). At one point during the leftist riot in 1967, the self-sufficiency rate of locally grown vegetables peaked at 48.8 percent (Lau 2013, 58). As we can see, the colonial government and the vegetable farmers in the New Territories were able to minimize the impact of the food strike relatively quickly thanks to a number of pre-emptive measures.

Although the colonial government was able to reduce Hong Kong’s reliance on Chinese vegetables during the mid-twentieth century, China continued to be the main supplier of meat and rice for Hong Kong. Prior to the 1950s, the indigenous inhabitants of the New Territories used to cultivate paddy rice as a staple crop. But as cheap rice from China took over the market, Hong Kong’s paddy rice farming went into a sharp decline, marking the end of subsistence agriculture (Hayes 2006, 75–79; Lou 2018).

Nonetheless, vegetable farming remained robust as the Chinese refugees continued to farm them for their livelihood. “By 1961, about 44 percent of the New Territories population were Chinese migrants and 70 percent of vegetable farmers were migrants from counties surrounding Guangdong” (Ng et al. 2023, 8).” With the encouragement of the colonial government, these Chinese refugee farmers—now known to Hongkongers as non-indigenous villagers—began to plant cash crops such as vegetables and flowers. This transition ushered in Hong Kong’s golden era of vegetable cultivation (Lau 2013, 65). Data reveal that by the early 1970s, the area of vegetable fields, flower gardens, orchards, and other crops in Hong Kong had already surpassed the area of paddy fields that once dominated New Territories’ landscape. Lau attributes this agricultural resurgence to the rising demand for fresh vegetables and flowers from the urban middle class, as well as the superior quality of locally grown produce (Lau 2013, 69). Since many of these refugees were experienced and highly skilled farmers in China, they not only brought a variety of vegetable seeds to the New Territories, but also introduced effective farming practices from their hometowns to the soil of Hong Kong. While farmers in China were responding to Chairman Mao’s appeal to concentrate their efforts on grain cultivation (Lau 2013, 69), their counterparts in Hong Kong had the freedom to grow vegetables and flowers that were in demand. Old farmers were particularly proud of their local specialties (*tou caan*), such as Yuen Long Sze Miu rice, Pat Heung ginger, Nam Chung lotus roots, Ngong Ping tea leaves, and Ta Kwu Ling bitter melon. The quality of these *tou caan* was so exceptional that they were not only grown for local consumption but were also exported to San Francisco and Western Europe (Lau 2013, 60).

Regrettably, this golden era of agriculture was short-lived. Initially, farms were hit by labor shortages as villagers in the New Territories sought higher-paying manufacturing and office jobs in the city. Subsequently, as Hong Kong transitioned into Asia’s financial hub, a rapidly expanding real estate market and urban sprawl emerged. This led to many farms being displaced, and the total area of arable land shrank dramatically. Meanwhile, the increased import of food from China caused a precipitous drop in Hong Kong’s food self-sufficiency rate, pushing local agriculture to the edge of extinction. By the 1980s, Hong Kong stopped producing rice altogether. Although fresh vegetables continued to be grown in the New Territories, the total proportion of locally produced vegetables declined from 40 percent in the 1960s to slightly over 30 percent in the 1980s and 1990s. By 2013, this figure had dropped to a mere 2.3 percent (Lau 2013, 1; Cheung 2014, 1019). Today, 90 percent of Hong Kong’s food supply is imported, predominantly from the PRC.

While statistics indicate a considerable increase in the import of food from China following the country’s market reform in 1978, Hong Kong’s reliance on China for food supply had been established long before this. Both Cheung (2014) and Ng et al. (2023) emphasize that food and water supplies have always been pivotal to China’s control of Hong Kong (Cheung 2014; Ng et al. 2023). According to Cheung, in 1951, Beijing sanctioned Ng Fung Hong Limited as the sole distributor of Chinese food products in Hong Kong (Cheung 2014, 1021). This move enabled China to consolidate its control over Hong Kong’s food supply while also providing a profitable market for its agricultural goods. Premier Zhou Enlai directed each province to set aside a portion of their produce for Hong Kong, which led to the establishment of daily delivery of fresh food items, including live animals, vegetables, and fruits, from Wuhan, Shanghai, Henan to Hong Kong (Cheung 2014, 1021).

Therefore, Cheung argues that even though the British “succeeded in winning the hearts and minds of the Hong Kong Chinese” (Cheung 2014, 1024), they could not prevent the eventual retrocession of Hong Kong to China. This was due, in part, to China’s strategic implementation of two powerful mechanisms: the Dongshen-Hong Kong Water Supply Scheme and Ng Fung Hong Limited. These institutions allowed China to exert control over the local populace by regulating their access to food and water. Consequently, both colonial officials and the public came to “accept that the fate of Hong Kong rested in Chinese control” (Cheung 2014, 1024).

### **Food security, political autonomy, and self-sufficiency**

### In affluent societies like Hong Kong, food security is often taken for granted. However, with the surge in food scandal incidents in China, people in Hong Kong are beginning to reassess their dependence on China’s food supply. The lower the self-sufficiency rate, the higher the reliance on imported food, and the greater the risk to food security.

### For a long time, the supply of food and water from the mainland was seen by the Hong Kong people as a “benevolence” from the Chinese government (Cheung 2014, 1024). However, the rise of localist discourses has fostered alternative narratives about the power dynamics between Hong Kong and China. For example, scholars and activists have argued that Hong Kong’s dependence on China is not unilateral. Ho-fung Hung contends that before the 1980s, “Chinese supply of foodstuffs and water to colonial Hong Kong…was one of the few channels through which China could absorb foreign currency in the face of the U.S. blockade” (Hung 2014). He also maintains that “Hong Kong’s purchase of Chinese water supply has been significantly more expensive than seawater desalination, a technology that Singapore relies on for its water” (Hung 2014). From around the 2000s, the narrative began to shift. The idea that Hong Kong was heavily indebted to China started to be seen as propaganda formulated by Beijing to intimidate Hong Kong people into believing they had no alternatives (Hung 2014, Cheung 2014).

This new insight has led many green people, especially those passionate about sustainable farming and urban-rural symbiosis, to conclude that revitalizing local agriculture is a viable solution to increase autonomy for Hong Kong. “We always say we want more [political] autonomy. But when your food and water are controlled by the Chinese government, what kind of autonomy do you have?” questioned Ken, a 36-year-old project manager who left his job to become a full-time farmer and farm-to-food educator.

Davide, a university graduate and anti-food waste advocate, went further to argue that without a reasonable level of food self-sufficiency, the aspiration for political autonomy is merely a fantasy: “If your whole society is dependent on imports, you are importing not only other people’s products but also their thoughts and values. That’s why Hong Kong identities have been so vague historically. We just accepted what others gave us—their thoughts, their values…Hong Kong people operate like a well-oiled machine. But machines don’t think!”

Evidently, the ethos driving the agriculture revitalization movement was more than just safeguarding Hong Kong’s food security. The movement was also driven by a desire for more autonomy and self-sufficiency. However, with only 51 square kilometres (sq km) of agricultural land remaining in Hong Kong (United Nations Statistics Division 2016), the government’s proposal to build residential developments on the remaining farmlands in the Northeast New Territories has ignited a major controversy.

A white sign with red writing on it

Description automatically generatedA picture containing text, tree, sign, outdoor

Description automatically generatedA picture containing text, outdoor, tree, sign

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**Figure 6:** Protest banners found in Ping Che. The slogans read (from the left):

“Hongkongers are betrayed, and our lands have been ceded.”

“Preserve Hong Kong Agriculture. It is our last granary.”

“Protect Northeast New Territories, revitalise first-class agriculture.”

As discussed in the previous chapter, many Hong Kong people saw this plan as an insidious attempt to mainlandize Hong Kong, thereby undermining its autonomy. For instance, environmental activist Gus questioned if the development plan would truly serve the interests of Hongkongers. “The Secretary for Development claims that there isn’t enough housing to meet the demands of a growing population and that’s why we need to develop our remaining farmlands. If this is the case, shouldn’t we address the root of the problem? The Individual Visit Scheme and the One-Way Permit let too many mainland tourists and immigrants come to Hong Kong every day. Their arrivals are draining Hong Kong’s resources!”

Gus became more and more worked up as he spoke: “All I want is for the government to honor the Basic Law, which promises Hong Kong a high degree of autonomy for at least 50 years. But now, 16 years on, everything has changed. I don’t want Hong Kong to become an independent city-state. I just want the mainlanders to respect Hong Kong and its people.”

Retired teacher Daisy and interior designer Bob echoed Gus’s sentiments. They called for stricter immigration controls and disputed the government’s grounds that population growth necessitates development. “You can’t justify development with population growth. Hong Kong’s birth rate is extremely low. The growth the government speaks of doesn’t stem from the local Hong Kong population. The government has allowed too many mainland people into Hong Kong. They’re sinking us!” argued Daisy. Bob concurred, “You need to distinguish between who’s living here and who’s not. You wouldn’t open your house to everyone, would you?”

Despite their politically charged commentary, most green people denied any interest in Hong Kong or Chinese politics (Lam-Knott 2018). Disclaimers such as “I have no interest in politics”, “I am not too keen on politics”, or “I don’t want to politicize the matter” were common refrains during our discussion of green living. Those who did recognize the political nature of their advocacy often expressed their frustration at being “forced to engage in politics because the Hong Kong government is failing us.” For example, urban planner Leo initially dismissed “universal suffrage” as just another political slogan. But as he became more involved in the resistance to the Northeast New Territories development plan, he gradually understood its significance: “Without universal suffrage and democracy, we can’t change anything or have any say in urban planning, which directly impacts our environment. When we can’t influence the planning of our city or rural areas, we will end up with a society where farmers can’t farm and fishermen can’t fish. They lose their livelihood, leaving us with a monolithic economy based on finance and real estate only.”

### **The pursuit of personal freedom and the right to live otherwise**

While some critics have expressed skepticism towards the call for revitalizing local agriculture and dismissed it as urban dwellers’ rural romanticism, the green people maintained that they were being realistic about the potential and limitations of Hong Kong’s agriculture. In January 2013, an inaugural conference titled “Hong Kong Agriculture Forum: Agriculture is a Crucial Part of the City” took place at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Co-organized by eight green groups, including the Conservancy Association, Mapopo Community Farm, Organic Farmers Club, Produce Green Foundation, Hong Kong Social Economies Alliance, Greenpeace, Greeners Action, and Green Sense, the organizers made the following appeal: “If you agree that agriculture should not be a sacrificial lamb for urban development and that farmland is not a feast for property developers, please allow us to explain the function and value of agriculture for a city.” Attendees ranged from full-time, part-time, and leisure farmers, to environmentalists, university professors, educators, green living advocates, academics, religious leaders, legislative councilors, and former government officials. The four-hour conference discussed a wide range of issues, such as the development of urban agriculture in comparison to other major cities; competition between housing demands and arable land; food safety; the fluctuation in prices of imported vegetables from mainland China; the value of agriculture as a public good (*gung gung coi*) and cultural heritage; and how to achieve a realistic percentage of self-sufficiency; among other topics.

One of the most interesting and surprising points that arose during the discussion was that although food safety and food security were important issues, a high self-sufficiency rate was not the goal of the Agricultural Revitalization Movement. While some scholars and land activists suggested a self-sufficiency rate as high as 30%, most conference participants did not care about the number. They were more concerned with personal autonomy and the preservation of agriculture as a way of life. Urban farming enthusiasts Chan Chan and Ka Yan made this point clear: “The self-sufficiency rate is not the most important thing because even if we revitalize all the arable land, Hong Kong won’t be able to produce all the food we need. I want to preserve local agriculture because I believe people should have the option to live the life they want. Not everyone wants to be a banker. Some people want to be farmers, and that option should be available to them.” Ka Yan agreed, “What is important to me is not the self-sufficiency rate per se, but the right to live the way you want. If some people want to live in the village, you shouldn’t force them to live in a high-rise apartment.”

Their emphasis on farming as an alternative lifestyle suggests that agriculture revitalization is not only a movement to ensure food security or a means to reclaim political autonomy, but also a fight for personal freedom and the right to live differently in an increasingly homogenized society. Prior to the controversial development plan in northeast New Territories, the destruction of Choi Yuen Village in 2010 to make way for a high-speed rail connecting Hong Kong and China led many Hongkongers, especially younger generations, to question the government’s overall development blueprint (Ku 2012; Ng 2022; Chen and Szeto 2015). They asked: Should we always yield to residential development? Should we abandon farming just because there are not enough economic incentives? Does development equate to economic growth? Is GDP the only measure of well-being? Must we all live in high-rise apartments? Is rural living possible in Hong Kong? How democratic is Hong Kong’s urban planning? Do people have a say?

Lam Chiu-Ying, environmentalist and former director of the Hong Kong Observatory, once asserted that Hong Kong was entering a new historical moment because people had awakened to the fact that life is not all about money. And development shouldn’t mean just building more apartments, roads, and bridges. As the green people reconsidered their relationship with the soil, Lam said they “no longer accepted the kind of development that removes people from their land” (Lam Chiu-Ying in Chan 2012). Rather, these green people were pursuing a new way of living that prioritizes sustainability and self-sufficiency over productivity and economic growth. They saw growing their own food as a practice that would free them from a political economy that offered little promise for their futures. An increasing number of well-educated young people were contemplating the possibility of becoming full-time farmers because they felt farming provided them with more dignity and autonomy than working for a company that could fire them at any time.

The green people’s desire for personal freedom and the right to live otherwise was also reflected in their admiration for Brother Au, the “master of simple living” whom I introduced in Chapter 2. A highly respected figure within the green living community, Brother Au’s practice of freeganism and his unique perspective on freedom inspired many green people to carve out alternative lifestyles in the high-capitalist society of Hong Kong. In his widely read autobiography *The Fewer, The Freer: Twenty Years of Joyful Self-Cultivation in Yanliao* (Au 2008), Brother Au introduced the Sinophone world to the philosophy and practice of simple living, which aimed not only at reducing waste and pollution but also at liberating people from societal constraints. Contrary to the consumerists who believed that freedom could be bought, Brother Au insisted that true freedom could only be achieved when people free themselves from certain wants and desires through ethical self-cultivation. To lead by example, in the past three decades, Brother Au has lived a self-sufficient life without most modern amenities, first in rural Taiwan and later in a village in Hong Kong. Every day he fetched water from the stream, grew his own vegetables, and collected discarded vegetables from the nearby market (Lou 2019). As a firm upholder of the principle that happiness is not how much you have, but how little you need, Brother Au maintained that people’s avarice for material goods was not only detrimental to the environment, it was also the root of their suffering as they became enslaved to their material possessions (Lou 2019).

Inspired by Brother Au’s motto “the fewer, the freer,” a small number of green people, often referred to as the “deep green” (*sam luk*) by their peers, had relinquished their urban office jobs to become farmers in the New Territories. They not only endeavored to grow as much of their own food as possible, some had even built their own off-grid homes in the rural areas.

However, adopting a completely freegan lifestyle was a rarity in Hong Kong. Most people could not simply relocate to the countryside or live without some form of employment. As a result, freecycling has emerged as a middle-ground approach to freeganism (Lou 2019). Take Gok, a twenty-two-year-old, for example. He managed to embrace a semi-freegan lifestyle by selectively incorporating Brother Au’s teachings into his everyday life. He gave up shopping entirely, obtained most of his food from scavenging at bakeries, supermarkets, and rubbish bins, and even began growing his own vegetables after learning permaculture. Yet, despite these efforts, Gok hesitated to quit his tutoring job and lived like Brother Au at such a young age. He admitted, “It’s true that most jobs are oppressive and enslaving, but I don’t think I can survive without a job in Hong Kong. Hong Kong is an expensive city.” (Lou 2019)

Gok’s concern was shared by many aspiring freegans in Hong Kong. As such, the “lighter green” (*cin luk*) has resorted to freecycling in an attempt to create a relatively self-sufficient way of life. By 2015, there were approximately 50 Chinese-speaking freecycling groups in Hong Kong, most of which used Facebook as their online platforms. Oh Yes It’s Free (OYIF), a group that “encouraged freecycling, studied waste problems, promoted mutual aid, and reflected on the value of money and consumption”, was the most popular and influential freecycling group during my fieldwork in 2012-2013.

At its peak, OYIF had attracted over 70,000 members. As the freecycling movement gained traction, OYIF sought to do more than just provide people with an online platform to give and receive items for free. It had rapidly evolved into a vocal critic of Hong Kong’s consumerist culture and an enthusiastic proponent of mutual aid, grassroots activism, and sustainable living (Lou 2019).

In 2012, OYIF had joined hands with the Nobanker Youth Commune Freespace (hereafter Freespace), a community project that emerged in the wake of the Occupy Central protest, to experiment with “offline” freecycling and the concept of communal living in Hong Kong. The Freespace initiative was crowdfunded by the founder of OYIF and a group of young people who wanted to mitigate not just waste but also poverty and inequality in Hong Kong. Despite numerous challenges, the activists and volunteers managed to raise enough funds to rent a 3,000-square-feet industrial warehouse for items that would have otherwise ended up in landfills (Lou 2019).

Much like OYIF, Freespace not only salvaged items in good condition, but also those that were visibly damaged and worn out. For instance, even though polyurethane handbags couldn’t be repaired once worn out, the freecyclers had disassembled the zippers and buckles for other uses. In doing so, Freespace had saved tens of thousands of discarded items and repaired hundreds within a span of four months. The warehouse, filled with shelves made of used cardboard boxes, soon became a hub for like-minded individuals to explore freecycling and the potential of communal freeganism in Hong Kong (Lou 2019).

As this dynamic evolved into a nascent form of communal freeganism, the freecyclers came to realize that they did not need to retreat into remote mountains like Brother Au to be truly free. They found that the journey towards personal and economic freedom need not be a solitary endeavor. Through sharing, recycling, and bartering, the freecyclers challenged the ingrained notion that a laissez-faire economy was synonymous with freedom in Hong Kong. They advocated for a different kind of “free market”, one they dubbed the “Really, Really Free Market (RRFM)”, where freedom was collectively achieved through responsibility, mutual aid, and ethical practices. Although the Freespace experiment fell apart in March 2014 due to insufficient funds, Hong Kong’s green people continued to explore ways of exercising their “social freedom” (Honneth 2017). For instance, by building a green new world and revitalizing the local soil of their communities (Lou 2019).

### **Post-materialism or post-patriotism? On the revitalization of local soil**

The recent fervor surrounding urban farming led some authors, scholars, and activists to conclude that Hong Kong had entered a “post-materialist era” (Lee and Tang 2013). This term, first coined by Ronald Inglehart, posits that as societies grow wealthier, people tend to place more emphasis on post-materialistic values, such as environmentalism, human rights, and quality of life (Inglehart 1977; Inglehart 1990). Although Lee and Tang’s study did find that the post-1980s generations (*baat sap hau*) were more inclined towards post-materialism compared to their parents and grandparents (Lee and Tang 2013), they contended that Inglehart’s post-materialist thesis could not neatly explain the case of Hong Kong. This is because if economic security were the sole catalyst for post-materialistic values, Hong Kong’s post-materialistic turn would have occurred during the 1980s and 1990s when its economy was at its peak (Wong and Wan 2009).

Similarly, public intellectual Daniel Lee refuted the claim that Hong Kong had entered a post-materialist era. Instead, he argued that it was the lack of upward mobility and material comfort that propelled the “post-80 generation” to demand different politics and a different way of living. While the older generations had benefited from China’s market reform, the younger generations were facing the gloomiest economic time in Hong Kong history. The skyrocketing house prices meant that young people could never have their own homes. Most industries were monopolized by a few business magnates, making it increasingly difficult for ordinary people to climb up the class ladder in the absence of economic diversity (Lee 2014). It was exactly this hopelessness that sparked moments of political awakening. As Lee wrote soon after the end of the Umbrella Movement in 2014, “The awakening of the Umbrella Generation is not the result of abandoning material pursuits, but rather a desperate fight back against the declining standard of living in Hong Kong. Those who think the Umbrella Movement is an embodiment of post-materialism must have lived a pretty good life.” (Lee 2014)

In light of these debates, I propose an intermediate stance for understanding the rise of green living and the revitalization of the local in Hong Kong. While the green people exhibited certain characteristics that might be deemed “post-materialist”, such a paradigm shift was neither a direct result of material comfort nor financial insecurity, but the consequence of a growing Hong Kong identity (Lou 2022). For a long time, Hongkongers were caught between viewing “Hong Kong as apart from China and Hong Kong as a part of China” (Mathews 1997, 3). This was not only because Hong Kong’s cultural identity was formed under the influences of colonialism, but as I have discussed in Chapter 1, such an “identity crisis” also had to do with the so-called “refugee mentality” (*naan man sam taai*), from which Hong Kong was seen as a temporary sanctuary rather than a place that people could call home (Lou 2022).

Though this refugee mentality has waned over the years, the emotional connection between Hong Kong and China remained strong until the Hong Kong-China conflict escalated in the early 2010s. Before that, Hong Kong people had always shown their care and sympathy to their Chinese counterparts. The Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements in China (hereafter the Alliance) was established in May 1989 to support the student protest in Beijing. For 30 years, tens of thousands of Hong Kong people had attended the annual memorial to commemorate those who died in the Tiananmen crackdown, until the Hong Kong government banned it in 2020. In addition, Hong Kong people used to be extremely generous with their donations to China whenever there was a natural disaster. In 2008, they donated over 900 million Hong Kong dollars to aid the disaster relief of the Sichuan Earthquakes.

These kind gestures, however, were a thing of the past. Since the early 2010s, Hong Kong people’s patriotism had plummeted so much that some of them didn’t even want to attend the memorials for the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests on June 4, an annual event that held profound social and political significance in Hong Kong. In 2013, the Alliance was severely criticised for using the slogan “Love our country, love our people: this is the Hong Kong spirit” for the annual June 4 memorial. Critics reproached the Alliance for imposing patriotism on memorial participants, many of whom stated they had no feelings for China.

Meanwhile, a 2014 poll by the Chinese University of Hong Kong found that only 8.9% of interviewees would identify themselves as “Chinese”—a record low in 18 years. Under the influence of localism, Hong Kong people’s reaction to the Lushan earthquake in 2013 was starkly different from their reactions to the Sichuan earthquake in 2008. Localist scholar Chin Wan, author of *On the Hong Kong City-State*, has long opposed donations of any kind to China. He sees philanthropy as emotional blackmail or guilt trap, contrived by China to impose a moral obligation to aid the Chinese. This view gained prominence when Hong Kong residents learned that much of their donations for the 2008 earthquake had evaporated amidst corruption.

Against this backdrop, I contend that Hong Kong is at the confluence of post-materialism and post-patriotism. This shift was manifested in people’s desire to reconnect with the local soil, both literally and figuratively. In Cantonese, the term for “the local” is *buntou*, meaning “this soil”. In this context, returning to the soil is not just about resuming farming; it also signifies taking root and reconnecting with one’s local environment. In this sense, being rooted transcends the mere idea of settling in a city; it embodies the profound commitment to building a meaningful relationship with one’s community.

The idea that a person is rooted in the soil was encapsulated in Fei Xiaotong’s *From the Soil*, a cornerstone analysis of rural Chinese society. In the book, Fei wrote: “City dwellers scorn country people for their closeness to the land; they treat them as if they were truly ‘soiled.’ But to the country people, the soil is the root of their lives…Always waiting for their crops to mature, those old farmers seem to have planted half their own bodies into the soil” (Fei 2001, 38-39).

Intriguingly, these words have been repeated to me time and again by my green friends in Hong Kong, albeit without reference to Fei Xiaotong. Unlike the arrogant city dwellers portrayed in Fei’s writing, the green people in Hong Kong have developed a profound reverence for the soil and the farmers who work it. As a green friend of mine often remarked: “We don’t own the soil. We belong to the soil (*jan suk tou*).” The phrase *san tou bat ji*, which can be translated as “people and soil are one”, is derived from a Buddhist text and has been widely embraced by the green people in Hong Kong. They maintained that when people are uprooted from the soil, achieving a healthy and wholesome life becomes near impossible, for it is the soil that serves as the bond between humans and nature.[[29]](#footnote-29)

In this and the previous chapter, I illustrated how the “local soil” (*buntou*) gave rise to the narratives of the Local Agriculture Revitalization Movement and the Movement against the Northeast New Territories Development Plan. These two movements shaped the political contours of the green living movement, underscoring that environmental issues are inherently intertwined with the broader social and political matrix of Hong Kong. When Timothy Choy conducted fieldwork among the environmentalists in Hong Kong during the 1990s, he already noted that “the ways people in Hong Kong came to grapple with particular problems of the environment refracted other social, political, and economic questions” (Choy 2011, 15). Three decades later, I found this remains largely true, if not more acute. Whenever an environmental issue is framed as a threat to Hong Kong’s autonomy or uniqueness, it quickly captures newspaper headlines, and people are more inclined to rally against it. While some Hongkongers used inflammatory metaphors like “locust infestation” to express their frustration and resentment over mainlandization, others such as those within the green living community chose more positiveagricultural metaphors to inspire hope. By “revitalizing the local soil”, these green people demonstrated that meaningful changes can be made within their own communities, paving the way for others to follow. As previous studies have shown, motivating individuals to care about issues beyond their immediate communities is often a monumental task (Norgaard 2006; Norgaard 2011; Gifford 2011; Leiserowitz 2006). Considering this, localism can be a powerful tool not only for grassroots mobilization in Hong Kong (Chen and Szeto 2015), but also in other post-industrial societies in Europe and the United States. As Katz and Nowak argue, solving problems at the local level is not only more practical; in many cases, it produces better results through a more democratic process (Katz and Nowak 2017). Therefore, instead of equating localism with parochialism or xenophobia, it’s vital to recognize that localism has the potential to motivate ordinary citizens to partake in local environmental actions (Chen and Szeto 2015). While such self-initiated changes might seem trivial, in the long run, they play a crucial role in restoring agency and forging new environmental and political identities.

***7. Slow Hope***

I have lost count of how many times the green people mentioned the word “hope.” A particularly striking example comes from the Gaia School, the only primary school in the region dedicated to green living education. In their “call for donation” statement, the Gaia School proclaims that Hong Kong also needs its own “Project Hope” (*hei mong gung cing*). Those familiar with the philanthropic landscape of China will recognize Project Hope as a renowned charity initiative aimed at providing education to impoverished children in China’s rural areas. Launched in 1989 by the China Youth Development Foundation (CYDF), Project Hope is arguably the most iconic philanthropic program in contemporary China. Nevertheless, the Project Hope evoked by the Gaia School is distinct from that in China. By leveraging this well-known name in the education sector, the Gaia School underscores the importance of green living education, suggesting that it is as vital, if not more so, than addressing child poverty. As they declared in their donation plea:

While most Hong Kong children aren’t burdened by financial poverty, rampant consumerism and hyper-competitiveness have deepened their spiritual poverty (*sam ling pan kung*). A happy childhood is crucial for fostering an optimistic character and a positive outlook on life. Through *santai likhang*, our teachers at the Gaia School show our children how to live with hope and care for people, nature, and society.

The Gaia School’s proclamation epitomizes the core belief of the green living community: by setting a positive example, one can cultivate hope by sowing a seed of change in others. In retrospect, narratives of hope were abundant during the early 2010s when Hong Kong’s civil society was in full bloom. Alongside the green living movement, numerous other social initiatives sought to spark hope in Hong Kong (cf. Chow, Wong, and Chow 2012). Two particularly notable initiatives were the Make a Difference Social Lab (MaD Social Lab) and the Human Library Hong Kong. The MaD Social Lab was a pioneer in bringing government agencies and citizens together to co-create a better public life through community engagement and design thinking. Meanwhile, the Hong Kong Human Library was part of a global educational campaign aimed at combating prejudices and discrimination in society by fostering open dialogue and sharing personal life histories.

In September 2014, a remarkable movement sprouted from the soil that had nurtured various hopeful initiatives and active civil participation. The 79-day occupation offered Hong Kong people a glimpse of utopia in a hyper-capitalist society. When the Umbrella Movement ended, a profound sense of dismay and defeatism engulfed Hong Kong (Rühlig 2015; Ho 2020). The perceived failure, compounded by the subsequent arrests and trails of protesters, deeply demoralized the activist community. With a significant decline in street protesters during the post-Umbrella Movement years, many activists pivoted towards community work—a strategy they termed *sam gaang sai zok*, which can be translated to “deep plowing and meticulous cultivation” within the local community. In the wake of the Umbrella Movement, it is estimated that at least 45 post-umbrella movement organizations were formed (Lam 2017b). “The idea was that democracy is not just about electoral and constitutional struggles or protests in crisis moment, but everyday engagement, with local community affairs and mutual help” (Lee 2019, 21-22).

Five years later, the seeds sown in these community projects blossomed once again during the 2019 Anti-Extradition Bill Movement (hereafter referred to as the Anti-ELAB Movement). Given the apparent public disengagement after the Umbrella Movement, the resurgence of activism took many by surprise. No one had anticipated that over a million Hongkongers would take to the streets. The young generation, in particular, was fearless and undeterred by potential imprisonment or violent confrontations. That’s when we realized that the plants hadn’t been killed. They had just stayed dormant. Political scientist Ming-Sho Ho argues that the lessons learned from the setbacks of the Umbrella Movement emboldened Hongkongers to stage a more formidable protest five years later. He suggests that the Umbrella Movement’s occupation zones had fermented innovative tactics that were later employed; and organizations formed after the Umbrella Movement nurtured a network of civic participation from a diverse group of people, laying the foundation for future mobilization. To avoid past mistakes, protesters also saw the importance of decentralized decision-making and greater tolerance of radical and militant resistance.

While many studies have emphasized the political awakening inspired by the Umbrella Movement (Ho 2020; Ma and Cheng 2021), few have examined the sociocultural conditions that gave rise to it (Hui and Lau 2015). Yet without the foundation laid by informal civil society networks (cf. Lam 2017a; Lam 2017b; Lee 2019) and the annual protest culture (Lee 2019) that had been nurturing Hong Kong people’s “civic values and identities” (cf. Cheng et al. 2022, 654) during “peacetime” Hong Kong, these remarkable movements would have never happened. Indeed, the “prefiguration of an alternative urban commons” (Chow 2019, 36) during the Umbrella Movement wasn’t an accidental “spillover” (Meyer and Whittier 1994) from Occupy Movements in other parts of the world (Hui and Lau 2015; Chow 2019). Rather, it had roots in the green and sustainable communities depicted in this book, which have consistently embodied values of “reciprocity, solidarity, and sustainability” (Chow 2019, 36) in Hong Kong.

As I write, Hong Kong is grappling with unprecedented trials and tribulations. After a yearlong protest against authoritarianism and police violence in 2019, the Anti-ELAB Movement was abruptly halted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Then, on 30 June 2020, the Chinese government bypassed the local legislature to impose the National Security Law (NSL). This sweeping legislation grants Beijing exceptional power to crack down on any activities perceived as threats to China’s national security. The NSL is not only a devastating blow to Hong Kong’s longstanding tradition of free speech, but it also marks the end of the “One Country, Two Systems.” Since the enactment of the NSL, a number of political parties and civil society organizations have been disbanded. Previously outspoken individuals went silent. Ordinary citizens rushed to adopt pseudonyms and removed politically sensitive content on their social media. Mass arrests of protesters, activists, and opposition politicians have become commonplace, sparking a new wave of emigration to the United Kingdom. As a result, many have declared Hong Kong as “dead” and its future “hopeless.”

Amidst the somber developments in the city, I felt naïve to talk about “hope”, even though it was a prevailing sentiment during my fieldwork. So for many years, I was indecisive about keeping the word “hope” in the book’s title. My dilemma was resolved when I came across Christof Mauch’s book *Slow Hope* and as I delved deeper into Buddhism. Before this, my understanding of hope was influenced by my green friends and thinkers such as Terry Eagleton, Joanna Macy, and Chris Johnstone. They taught me that hope has to be more than just a positive affect. In fact, as an emotion, hope is paradoxical because to hope is to envision a better future while being constantly “reminded of what is not and what might never be” (Mattingly 2010, 3). This may give the impression that hope requires optimism. But as Eagleton points out, hope and optimism are not the same (Eagleton 2015). A person with an optimistic outlook on life probably doesn’t need much hope, but a pessimist does. As strange as this may sound, hope has the best chance to flourish in times of hopelessness (Eagleton 2015, 133). As the saying goes, the darker the night, the brighter the stars. Over the years, an important lesson I’ve learned from the green people and the activists in Hong Kong is that a strong feeling of hope is not a prerequisite for living the change and leading by example. As Macy and Johnstone reasoned, “If we require this kind of hope before we commit ourselves to an action, our response gets blocked in areas where we don’t rate our chances too high” (Macy and Johnstone 2012, 2-3). Proponents of *santai likhang* showed us that affective or emotive hope is a kind of passive hope. Hope should not just be something to have, but something that we do (Macy and Johnstone 2012, 3). Rather than waiting for external agencies to bring about changes, the green people cultivated “active hope” (Macy and Johnstone 2012) by becoming the agents of change themselves.

For the past decade, the idea of active hope has informed my research on green living and influenced my personal life. While I recognize that *santai likhang* does not offer a direct route to ecotopia, its transformative potential fills me with hope and a sense of agency. Tragically, the violent suppression of the Anti-ELAB Movement and the chilling effect of the National Security Law have thwarted many attempts at direct actions and stifled much of citizens’ imagination. When political persecution becomes a daily reality, any mention of hope for Hong Kong feels naïve, even trite. That was when I started asking myself: If active hope can no longer sustain us, what is to be done?

Christof Mauch’s short book *Slow Hope* has renewed my hope and strengthened my confidence in the power of *santai likhang*. Taking a longue durée perspective, Mauch critiques the glorification of speed and acceleration since the Industrial Revolution and directs our attention to narratives of slow hope around the world. “In a world where developments are evolving ever more rapidly,” he said, “slowness can be frustrating” (Mauch 2019, 21). However, it is unrealistic to expect that we can get out of this mess rapidly and easily. These cases are slow in their unfolding because they often come with setbacks (Mauch 2019, 23). Of all the stories that he told, the Slow Food Movement strikes a chord with me for obvious reasons. Piedmont, the region in northwest Italy where the Slow Food Movement began, “had seen a long history of peasant poverty, violence, and resistance to oppression” (Mauch 2019, 24). The movement has not only transformed Piedmont into a region where traditional artisan food production is preserved and embraced, but it has also ignited a global resistance to contemporary fast-food culture, inspiring millions around the world to adopt ecological foodways:

Thirty years later, Slow Food is present in more than 160 countries, poor and rich. It features tens of thousands of projects around the globe; it stands for non-hierarchical politics, for food sovereignty, for the protection of biodiversity, and for sustainable agriculture. There can be no question that the unscrupulous commodification of food and the destruction of foodstuffs will continue to have a devastating impact on soils, livelihoods, and ecologies around the globe. Slow Food cannot undo the steamrolling developments of the global food economy, but it can upset its ideologues, it can “speak differently” and demonstrate that alternative visions and possibilities exist that can liberate local traditions and food cultures, communities, and ecosystems (Mauch 2019, 24)

In his book *Envisioning Real Utopias*, sociologist Erik Olin Wright put forward three models of social transformation: ruptural, interstitial, symbiotic (Wright 2010, 214). Based on this theory, Hong Kong scholar-activist Sung-ming Chow contends that while the occupied movement represented an attempt at “ruptural transformation”, those advocating green living, ethical consumption, fair trade, and community economies were paving ways for “interstitial transformation” (Chow, Wong, and Chow 2012, 17)—a path of change that “progressively enlarges the social spaces of social empowerment” (Wright 2010, 228). The term “interstitial” is “used in social theory to describe processes occurring within the gaps or fissures of a dominant power structure” (Wright 2010, 229). From this perspective, it is plausible that the transformative seeds sown by the green living community might be lying dormant inside these cracks, awaiting the right moment to germinate.

When will it happen? No one really knows. What is certain is that it will. Beyond the green living community, the agricultural metaphors of “seeds” and “fruits” are also present in Buddhism (and Hinduism). Buddhism teaches us that “according to the seed that’s sown, so is the fruit ye reap therefrom” (a quote from the Samyutta Nikāya). Though often misconstrued in Western society as a form of cosmic justice or moral bookkeeping (“what goes around comes around”) (Schlieter 2013), at its core, the Buddhist concept of karma refers to the cause-and-effect of one’s actions or the sum of their deeds (i.e., the seeds). The timing of “ripening” (i.e., fruits) is dependent on myriad factors and conditions, encapsulated by another key Buddhist concept, *pratyaya*. In this vein, even though we don’t know when the fruits of the green living seeds will ripen, we should have unwavering confidence that they will mature in due course. As our active hope is being suppressed, the notion of slow hope has become more relevant than ever. Mauch’s writings have illuminated how hopeful visions can slowly and imperceptibly be turned into realities (Mauch 2019, 36). Our duty as scholars is to continue documenting and telling stories, visions, and actions of slow hope that will empower us to “become thinkers, actors, and activists capable of imagining alternatives” (Mauch 2019, 37) amidst apocalyptic stories of environmental degradation (Mauch 2019, 19-20), capitalism (Gibson-Graham 1993), and authoritarianism (Snyder 2017). For Hongkongers who have traditionally celebrated speed and prized efficiency, their challenge lies in learning to accept and appreciate that slowness is a necessary part of interstitial social transformation. As hopeless as the present may seem, I do think it is in dark times like these that alternative politics would be given full and serious consideration.

***Glossary***

*luksik saangwut* 綠色生活

*ji yin meng* 自然名

*santai likhang* 身體力行

*lou lou* 老路

*jau hai m bongchan deichaa seung* 就係唔幫襯地產商

*fu hang* 苦行

*luksik pangyau* 綠色朋友

*waanbou ge pangyau* 環保嘅朋友

*daa gung zai* 打工仔

*pou tung hoenggong jan* 普通香港人

*wu yi shan xiao er bu wei* 勿以事少而不為

*shenjiao* 身教

*yanjiao* 言教

*gwailou kui* 鬼佬會

*sei daai waan tyun* 四大環團

*ziseon waijyun wui* 諮詢委員會

*Waanbao* 環保

*seon waanbou jitai* 純環保議題

*fongbin dik doi gaa* 方便的代價

*siu dim* 小店

*kung dak zi jau cin* 窮得只有錢

*waanbou jyun* 環保園

*joeng laap kap* 洋垃圾

*saam sik tung* 三色筒

*jau wuisau* 有回收

*mou zoizou* 無再做

*saam deoi jat lou* 三堆一爐

*laap kap zing fai* 垃圾徵費

*gwo zo hoi zauhai sansin* 過咗海就係神仙

*zau sou* 走數

*jyun tau gaam fai* 源頭減廢

*Lap Sap Chung* 垃圾蟲

*Cing Git Lung* 清潔龍

*nei gok dak hoenggong ge waanging dim joeng* 你覺得香港嘅環境點樣

*waanging* 環境

*luksik* 綠色

*gaan pok saang wut* 簡樸生活

*gaan pok saang wut daai si* 簡樸生活大師

*cang ci soeng bat tung* 層次上不同

*luksik manming* 綠色文明

*gaau waan bou* 搞環保

*ji fung ji zuk* 移風易俗

*ling taan tin dei* 零碳天地

*m ho ji haahaa kaau jansau heoizou* 唔可以下下靠人手去做

*jung soengsau zou waanbou*用雙手做環保

*daai ngoi fo gei*大愛科技

*ngo fuk zijin* 我復自然

*saang laang* 生冷

*wai bui loeng sam* 違背良心

*saangwut gaaujuk*生活教育

*yanliao jingtu* 鹽寮淨土

*yan* 鹽

*liao*寮

*jyu siu jyu zi jau* 愈少愈自由

*gaanpok sangwut jingdei* 簡樸生活營地

*sik seoi sauhang*惜水修行

*caan coek sauhang* 餐桌修行

*cing ji zijin gaaujuk*情意自然教育

*daai dei hang ze gai waak*大地行者計劃

*luksik waanbou m hai dak go gong*綠色環保唔係得個講

*jan cing mei*人情味

*jat ceot ji zok*日出而作

*jat jap ji sik*日入而息

*hang dung ze*行動者

*kong zang ze*抗爭者

*daai dei caan soeng*大地產商

*zung jung*中庸

*ping hang*平衡

*cyu jyu*廚餘

*tong zaa*湯渣

*cyu jyu gei*廚餘機

*waanbou haausou* 環保酵素

*luk sik neoi lau*綠色女流

*sikjung faijau*食用廢油

*fai jau zou*廢油皂

*zou dak gei do zou gei do* 做得幾多做幾多

*lin faandeoi ge zigaak dou mou*連反對嘅資格都無

*caai fo zyu sik*柴火煮食

*sau lin*修練

*liu jyu je*療癒夜

*liu jyu fo*療癒課

*sam beng* 心病

*sam ling* 心靈

*xinling* 心靈

*zing faa*淨化

*yangsheng* 養生

*seon jing zi jin*順應自然

*ji sam* 醫心

*sim sik*禪食

*zing sam*靜心

*gam jyu*禁語

boktung tindei sin 駁通天地線

*tianren heyi*天人合一

*dong zou*當茬

*naau si zung dik zingtou* 鬧市中的淨土

*noi sing* 內省

*sau zigei*修自己

*faat mun*法門

*zi gung* 志工

*ji gung* 義工

*chieh qua* 節瓜

*si gwaa*絲瓜

*zeon jik* 津液

*qi* 氣

*san sam ling* 身心靈

*Zheng Yan fashi* 證嚴法師

*Sheng Yan fashi* 聖嚴法師

*jan wai* 人為

*bat sik fuk* 不惜福

*gei cang* 基層

*gunggung popo* 公公婆婆

*duk dak syu siu* 讀得書少

*sing* *zyu waai hung* 成住壞空

*jyu zau dik kwai leot* 宇宙的規律

*mit mong* 滅亡

*san beng ji gaau*身病易搞

*sam beng naan gaau*心病難搞

*tautung ji tau goektung ji goek* 頭痛醫頭 腳痛醫腳

sauhang doucoeng 修行道場

*gei tok* 寄托

*bat si saangcaan* 不事生產

*zi liu* 治療

*mou zo zi gei*  無咗自己

*si nai* 師奶

*zik cyun dik gingjim*積存的經驗

*zi zoi*自在

*m zi ngo*唔自我

*ling sau*靈修

*gong wai* 崗位

*zyu fu*主婦

*neoi koeng jan*女強人

*zuk dung*觸動

*gam dung*感動

*mat ji leoi zeoi, jan ji kwan fan*物以累聚，人以群分

*lei si fung*利是封

*baai nin*拜年

bei nin 避年

*sap cyun sap mei* 十全十美

*lukluk moukung* 六六無窮

*hon syun* 寒酸

*mou min*無面

*mou ci*無翅

*sou jat dou*素一道

*jancing* 人情

*gaau cing*交情

*paai tau*派頭

*wun tsai chi* 碗仔翅

*ging caa* 敬茶

*wing zuk dei* 永續地

*sik sou* 食素

*gaa po jan mong*家破人亡

*ng san*五辛

*sousik ze* 素食者

*sik zaai* 食齋

*dip bin coi* 碟邊菜

*jing cau haak*應酬吓

*m wui mou dyundyun sik sou*唔會無端端食素

*jyun fan mei dou* 緣份未到

*taai zap zyu* 太執著

*zungsaang* 眾生

*siu ji* 燒衣

*joeng zaak*陽宅

*jam zaak*陰宅

*luksik banzong* 綠色殯葬

*sei jau so zong*死有所葬

*siu saa jat ci* 瀟灑一次

*wui gwai zi jin*回歸自然

*luk jam hau jan* 綠蔭後人

*jyun geoi man*原居民

*fei jyun geoi man*非原居民

*ding* 丁

*ding* 丁屋

*tyun dei*囤地

*min zozo* 面阻阻

*daai luk faa*大陸化

*zyun coi*專才

*daai coi siu jung*大才小用

*gun soeng hoeng bik*官商鄉逼

*jau gam cing*有感情

*moucin, moudei, moukyun*無錢、無地、無權

*lingjatzung sangwut fongsik* 另一種生活方式

*zung waan gaa zik* 中環價值

*bat cin bat caak*不遷不拆

*dei siu jan do*地少人多

*ji saan tin hoi*移山填海

*cyun*村

*cyun man* 村民

*hanno han X* 半農半X

*sing hoeng gung saang* 城鄉共生

*wing zuk zoi pui*永續栽培

*soeng kwai coi* 常規菜

*baak coi*白菜

*coi sam*菜心

*saang coi*生菜

*jau mak coi*油麥菜

*zyu naa coi*豬乸菜

*faan syu jip*番薯葉

*bat si bat sik* 不時不食

*jan cing mei* 人情味

*joeng dei jan*養地人

*daai wok faan* 大鑊飯

*sang caan deoi* 生產隊

*dou* 斗

*joengdei wandung* 養地運動

*dingzi hu*釘子戶

*wut ganng gin joengdei hipwui*活耕建養地協會

*lin zi* 蓮子

*se keoi ging zai*社區經濟

*si fan gyun*時分卷

*bun tou* 本土

*cek faa* 赤化

*daai luk faa* 大陸化

*zung gong maau teon* 中港矛盾

*bun tou ji sik* 本土意識

*zi jau hang* 自由行

*zung gong jung hap* 中港融合

*jan zyu sam taai* 恩主心態

*wong cung* 蝗蟲

*wong wo* 蝗禍

*duk coi* 毒菜

*hoeng gong nung jip leon taan* 香港農業論壇

*gan* 斤

*maan sing duk joek* 慢性毒藥

*tin zoi jan wo* 天災人禍

*jau loeng sam* 有良心

*tou caan* 土產

*gung gung coi*公共財

*sam luk* 深綠

*cin luk* 淺綠

*baat sap hau* 八十後

*naan man sam taai*難民心態

*jan suk tou* 人屬土

*san tou bat ji* 身土不二

*seoi gang* 水耕

*hei mong gung cing*希望工程

*sam ling pan kung* 心靈貧窮

*sam gaang sai zok* 深耕細作

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***Appendix 1***

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Starfish 海星 | Sky Dragon 天龍 | Flying Dragon 飛龍 | Little Dog 小狗 | Sunshine 陽光 |
| Black Charcoal 黑炭 | Aquila heliacal 白肩鵰 | Little Bird 小鳥 | Stegosaurus 劍龍 | Little rain 小雨 |
| Kandelia obovate 水筆仔 | Little Duck 小鴨 | Tiger 老虎 | Scarabs 金龜子 | Eggplant 茄子 |
| Little Mist 小嵐 | Little Camel 小駱駝 | Little Sheep 綿羊仔 | Mimosa pudica 怕羞草 | Sky 天翔 |
| White Cloud 白雲 | Owl 貓頭鷹 | Extra-terrestrial 外星人 | Swallow 燕子 | Maple Leaf 楓葉 |
| Bamboo Shoot 玉荀 | Green Bamboo Snake 青竹蛇 | Sparkles 火花 | Whale 鯨魚 | Happy Bird 快樂鳥 |
| Big Tree 大樹 | Little Flower 小花 | Acinonyx jubatus (a subspecies of Leopard) 大獵豹 | Rabbit 白兔 | Tornado 暴風 |
| Blue Dragon 藍龍 | Bat 蝙蝠 | Rare Earth 稀土 | Red Bean 紅豆 | Mushroom 蘑菇 |
| Monkey 馬騮 | Pineapple 菠蘿 | Leopard 花豹 | River 河流 | Bulldog 老虎狗 |
| Rose 玫瑰 | Ghost Fire 鬼火 | Dragonfly 蜻蜓 | Coffee Bean 咖啡豆 | Python大蟒蛇 |
| Common Reed 蘆葦 | Sunflower 太陽花 | Sled Dog 雪橇狗 | Little Tree 小樹 | Dolphin 海豚 |
| Cockroach 螳螂 | Hamster 倉鼠 | Happy Bird 開心烏 | Little Mouse 小老鼠 | Mars 火星 |
| Moon 月亮 | One Leaf 一葉 | Little Egret 白鷺 | Ganoderma 靈芝 | Chinese Plum Flower 梅花 |
| Wheat 麥穗 | Herb 香草 | Summer 夏天 | Dinasaur 恐龍 | Bees 蜜蜂 |
| Panda 熊貓 | Green Bird 青鳥 | Sun 太陽 | Cactus 仙人掌 | Little White Cat 小白貓 |

**Appendix 1:** A reproduction of a class roster of the Gaia School. Nature names are only used in Chinese.

***Appendix 2***

|  |
| --- |
| **Garbage Enzyme Recipe[[30]](#footnote-30)** |
| What you need:   * A plastic container (people usually reuse old plastic bottles). * Raw food and kitchen waste. * Sugar (ideally brown sugar). |
| 1. Dilute one portion of sugar and ten portions of water in a plastic bottle. |
| 2. Add uncooked vegetables and fruit peels into the mixture. Do not fill the bottle completely. Leave some space for fermentation. |
| 3. Record the production date, then place the bottle in a cool location, allowing the mixture to ferment for three months. |
| 4. You must let the air out during the first two weeks of fermentation to prevent the container from exploding. |
| 5. The final product should be brown-yellowish and possess a citrus aroma. |

|  |
| --- |
| **How to use garbage enzyme (A general guide to the dilution ratio)[[31]](#footnote-31)** |
| As shampoo and body wash: 1 (garbage enzyme):1 (shampoo or body wash):10 (water) |
| As laundry solution: 1 (garbage enzyme):1 (laundry powder/liquid):10 (water) |
| As a multi-purpose household cleaner: 1 (garbage enzyme):1 (washing up liquid):10 (water) |
| As deodoriser spray: 1 (garbage enzyme): 200 (water) |
| As plant fertiliser: 1 (garbage enzyme): 100 (water) |
| As insect repellent: 1 (garbage enzyme): 1000 (water) |

1. In Hong Kong, an “English name” is not necessarily English or Anglo-Saxon, but a secondary personal name using the Latin alphabet. As linguist Stephen Matthews explains, the tradition of adopting an “English name” traces back to the colonial era, when it was considered sophisticated to possess such a name, particularly when conducting business with English speakers. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The bulk of the fieldwork for this book took place between 2012 and 2013 during my fourteen-month stay in the New Territories. Subsequent visits to Hong Kong were made in 2016, 2018, and 2019. Throughout the last decade, I’ve kept in touch with many of the green people through various social media platforms, many evolving into personal friendships. Additionally, as a native of Macau, I’ve made numerous visits to Hong Kong and spent time with my extended family there prior to initiating this research project. All interviews were conducted in my mother tongue Cantonese. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Chau Siu-Cheung, Chan Koon-Chung, and Man Si-Wai were some of the most famous founding members of Green Power. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Peter Ho uses the term “embedded activism” to refer to strategies and tactics that social organisations use to cultivate a mutually beneficial relationships with the government, especially in semi-authoritarian states (Ho, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. However, it’s important to note that even during their “honeymoon period”, the environmentalists in the Advisory Committee had very little say in issues that had broader developmental implications. Previous research has shown that green groups’ influences were restricted to technical matters only (Chiu, Hung, and Lai 1999, 72). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This attitude is corroborated by a 2011 survey, which indicated that most Hongkongers regarded personal initiatives as the “single most important factor” towards achieving a sustainable society (Wong 2011, 223). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The Daya Bay nuclear plant, located in Longgang District, Shenzhen, is less than 50 miles away from Hong Kong. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Within the Buddhist circle, people address each other as *si hing* (a senior male fellow) or *si ze* (a senior female fellow). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. According to Judith Farquhar and Qicheng Zhang, the Chinese phrase *yangsheng*, literally “nurturing life”, denotes a broad range of contemporary but mainly traditional practices, such as Qigong and Tai Chi, for maintaining a happy and healthy life. See (Farquhar and Zhang 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Leave no trace first emerged as an education program to reduce the negative consequences of recreational activities in parks and wilderness areas in the United States, see (Simon and Alagona 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Dai *si hing* was pointing at the women volunteers I wrote about in the last chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Interestingly, this approach coincided with the advice of Weller and Bol, an anthropologist and an historian of China, who have long called for integrating Chinese concepts with contemporary environmental praxis: “Both individual well-being and communal human welfare are seen as integrally related to the state of the environment. In this regard we suggest that environmental understanding may be usefully linked to practices such as Chinese medicine, geomancy, and ch’i-kung” (Weller and Bol 1998, 337). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Oxfeld’s definition of moral economies is borrowed from Didier Fassin, who considers moral economy to be “the production, distribution, circulation, and use of moral sentiments, emotions and values, and norms and obligations in social space” (Fassin 2009, 1237). Fassin’s definition of moral economy as a product of historical and social process is broader than James Scott’s definition of moral economy, which is grounded in the historical experiences of peasant societies in Southeast Asia and emerged as a form of popular justice (Scott 1976). In China, as in Hong Kong, moral economies can be found in banqueting, sharing of things or information, and reciprocal gift giving (Oxfeld 2020, 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The size of a banquets is usually determined by the number of tables. Typically, a medium size wedding banquet in Hong Kong hosts 30 tables (12 people per table). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. At the time of fieldwork (2012-2013), wedding gift money ranged from $500-$1500 HKD per guest. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. I thank Nir Avieli for suggesting this apt phrase to me. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. In Hong Kong, raw vegans are vegans who do not eat any food cooked above 48°C. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Sik sou*, literally “eating plain”, is the Cantonese Chinese phrase for vegetarianism *and* veganism. Since the Chinese term does not differentiate “vegetarianism” and “veganism”, I use the two terms interchangeably unless it is important to differentiate the two in a given context. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Note that it is not a novelty to eat *dip bin choi*. Since the 12th century, Chinese vegetarians have been using *dip bin choi* (or *roubian cai* in Mandarin) to circumvent meat in social occasions (Kieschnick 2005:204). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. The term *sik zaai* is used to distinguish non-Buddhist and Buddhist veganism. Buddhist vegans not only abstain from eating eggs and meat, but also “the five pungent plants” called *wu xin* (i.e. Onions, Garlic, Scallions, Chives and Leeks) (Kieschnick 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Abstention from meat during the mourning period has a long history in China. See Kieschnick (2005, 195) and Sterckx (2005, 40). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Columbaria spaces are niches where cremated ashes are stored. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. If a family fails to secure a public columbarium space for the deceased, they have to turn to private columbaria providers. The price difference between public and private niches is significant. During my fieldwork in the early 2010s, a public niche was priced between $2,800-$3,700 HKD, which is far cheaper than private niches that could cost anything from $50,000-$500,000 HKD. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Before the first wave of urbanisation in the 1970s, the British-HK government leased the crowd lands to the refugees at a relatively cheap price to keep them in the New Territories to stabilize the society and reduce pressure in urban areas. See Lau (2013) and Lou (2017a). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Land justice activists in Hong Kong argue that the housing crisis has nothing to do with the scarcity of land. See (Liber Research Community 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. The Chinese translation of “spontaneity” is *ziran*, which is the same term used for “nature” (Weller 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Although the “nail house tactic” (*dingzi hu*) (Hess 2010) was a widely used strategy in China, the approach of “adopting a land” to forestall future development was an unprecedented model of activism in Hong Kong. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. The project was run by the St. James’ Settlement and received sponsorships from Oxfam, the Urban Renewal Authority, and the Hong Kong government’s Enhancing Self-Reliance through the District Partnership Programme. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. This deeply held belief is one of the reasons that the green people strongly objected to the government’s proposal to introduce hydroponics (*seoi gaang*) in Hong Kong. They argued that this method was a tactic by the Hong Kong government to sever farmers from their land. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Source: (Chan 2011, 187). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Source: (Chan 2011, 187). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)