



RECYCLING : Missing the Target

by Phoebe Man and Rebecca Wong

While others are enjoying their lunch in a restaurant, Ho Ka-yong, the head cleaner in Yu Chui Court, and her fellow cleaners are still working in the refuse storage chambers of the Home Ownership Scheme estate.

“We just spend our free time to categorise the ordinary rubbish in the refuse storage chambers,” Ho says as she passes a pile of newspapers to another cleaning lady. With only five minutes left of their lunch break, they finish their lunchboxes in a hurry.

The cleaners give up their valuable free time to sort household rubbish into different types of waste for recycling, which is not part of their contracted work, simply because they can make extra cash.

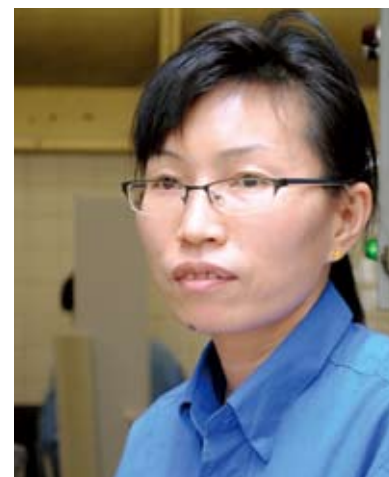
They can earn 10 cents per plastic bottle and 80 cents for each kilogramme of paper. According to one Tai Yuen Estate cleaner, who refuses to disclose her identity, workers can make up to HK\$300 a month, which accounts for up to 8 per cent of their income. The earnings can be even higher during festivals like Christmas, since the residents have more to throw away.

After separating domestic waste during their lunch break, cleaners from different housing estates sell their haul of paper and plastic to recycling contractors chosen by the property management companies in their own estates. They can also sell waste to other small individual recyclers.

Figures from the government show the overall recycling rate skyrocketing

from 14 per cent in 2004 to 31 per cent in 2008.

Raymond Yau, the manager of Wai Yeung Holdings, a recycling firm



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Ho Ka-yong explains how cleaners are involved in recycling on housing estates.

operating for more than 10 years, questions the meaning of the figures. Yau attributes the numbers to the increasing number of estates.

“We just spend our free time to categorise the ordinary rubbish in the refuse storage chambers.”

According to data obtained by Yau’s company, 80 to 90 per cent of their recycled waste comes from cleaners. Recycled waste collected by individual households accounts for about 10 per cent.

Although most of the classification work is done by cleaners rather than residents, Yu Chui Court was given a Silver Award in the Source Separation of Domestic Waste Programme last year. More than 17 kg of waste was collected per household per month on the estate. The programme was launched

in 2005 to encourage households to separate their waste for recycling.

Yau says that, based on reports from his company, the amount of waste collected from residents is actually declining. Some residents stop recycling after they realise the cleaners are helping to sort the waste. “The more hardworking the cleaners are, the better the recycling rate is,” he says.

A spokesman for the Environmental Protection Department, Mark Tam Tze-wah, explains how the government works out the statistics for the recycling programme.

He points out that the data handed in by participating estates in the scheme is just for reference. It will then be adjusted by using data on waste collected in landfills and exported waste, in addition to information from companies contracted by the department to conduct surveys.

Wai Woon-nam, a Sham Shui Po district councillor, is shocked when he first sees the government figures. “It is impossible to have such good figures!” he exclaims.

Wai says it is almost impossible for the government to get accurate recycling rates from old housing estates



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Raymond Yau questions the meaning of the figures.

like Nam Cheong Estate and Shek Kip Mei Estate. These estates do not have management companies or contracted recyclers who can collect and report credible data.

The waste on estates like these is separated by the cleaners who then sell it to individual recyclers nearby. When they are asked to fill in forms about how much recyclable waste is collected for their estates, they just fill in the numbers according to their hazy memory, says Wai.



Wai suggests that placing recycling bins on each floor would make it more convenient for residents to recycle their waste. But this has yet to be done.

According to a government document from 2007, around 70 per cent of the participating estates had only one set of recycling bins in each building.

“It would be costly to install recycling bins on each floor in old public housing estates,” Wai explains. “The corridor on each floor is very narrow. The bins have to be tailor-made to fit the space, which costs extra money.”

The installation of bins could also violate the Fire Safety Ordinance if the bins are viewed as an obstruction of a fire escape.

While it seems efficient for waste sorting to be carried out by willing and motivated people, relying on cleaners to do the job can actually lead to problems, according to Jacky Lau Yiu-shing, a general director of Lau Choi Kee. The company has been in the recycling business for more than 60 years and Lau is also a vice-chairman of the Hong Kong General Association of Recycling Business.



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Cleaners can earn up to HK\$300 per month, which accounts for up to 8 per cent of their income, by recycling domestic waste during their free time.



“If the recycling price is too low, cleaners simply throw away all the rubbish. Nothing can be recycled,” Lau says. “We could not receive even a piece of scrap paper at the early stage of this programme because the cleaning workers got nothing from recycled waste.”

At present, fluctuating recycling prices determine how much waste is recycled.

For instance, individual recyclers cannot offer much for plastic due to the great transportation and processing costs. Cleaners do not want to sacrifice their lunch hour to earn a small

amount of money. This results in a low recycling rate for plastic.

Then there are the market-oriented paper recyclers who can rack up their profit by offering low rates to cleaners.

Lau explains that recyclers may offer only 40 cents per kg of paper to cleaners, compared to the market rate of 70 cents. “When the price is down to a certain value, cleaners will definitely give up the job,” Lau says.

He explains that on the larger and newer housing estates, recycling companies have to pay an administrative fee to property management companies. This, in turn, lowers the rates they pay cleaners to recycle domestic waste. On the other hand, recycling companies in old housing estates can offer higher recycling prices to attract the cleaners due to their lower administrative expenses.

The gap between what the cleaners can get and the market rate has lowered the amount of domestic waste collected from larger housing estates. Most cleaners and residents consider the economic incentive when they decide whether or not to recycle.

According to Leung, one resident of Yu Chui Court, barter trade rather than cash is a better way to encourage recycling.

Barter trade is also a part of the Source Separation of Domestic Waste Programme. “The waste should be categorised by the one who earned the money,” says Leung. “Without money, it is hard to attract people to recycle.” She exchanges her newspapers and magazines for daily necessities like a roll of toilet paper through the barter trade counter once every two weeks.

“How can you recycle for nothing?” she continues. “Hong Kong people are so busy making a living. They won’t spend extra time to recycle the waste if no money is given to them.”

She admits that she is not concerned

about how the recycling programmes are run and where the waste goes. She just wants to know how much she can earn through her rubbish.

Lister Cheung Lai-ping, says there is not much inducement to get people engaged in recycling. “People who have a heart to do it will do it themselves,” the chief executive of Green Resources and former head of the Conservancy Association says.


Cheung says the government tends to seek easy ways out like burning the waste in incinerators. “If the government continues in this way, people will feel it isn’t their responsibility to do recycling as long as they are not paid.”

She always thinks it is useless to hold competitions on the source separation of domestic waste. Only companies are drawn to compete for the prizes but not residents. Besides, the people who sort the recyclables are the cleaners, and the situation will not improve if they are the only people involved.

“The cleaners should care about their health as well,” she says when she learns cleaners are the main waste



sorters in the refuse chambers.

Cheung suggests people should pay for the waste they produce. “Then, they will think before they buy things,” she says. 



Residents exchange newspapers and magazines for daily necessities through the barter trade counter.

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