



# A SIMPLE life

by Melanie Leung and Nia Tam

It is a common enough dream - to make big money and own a house with incredible views. But cash is not the only route to owning a dream home. The sea view that Fong Fai-kai enjoys is just spectacular.

It is a brisk morning in Cheung Chau, the cold wind that blows is salty from the sea. A 20-minute trudge uphill from the bustling market takes you onto a crude muddy track known as Labourer's Lane.

As its name implies, Labourer's Lane was opened up by a labourer. Seven years ago, Fong retired after 30 years of working in a *cha caan teng* in the city and came back to Cheung Chau. He had promised to fulfil his father's dying wish, that he find his childhood home, which had been abandoned for four decades.

The original path to the land where his family house and farm stood had become inaccessible. It took Fong two years to complete Labourer's Lane. Each day of those two years, he survived on just a few dollars, which barely brought him three buns to eat.

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“My family and I belong here,” says 63-year-old Fong.

In seven years, Fong has transformed the wasteland into a farm with a 2.5 hectare field. He often goes to the market and collects unused

materials for construction. With bits of bamboo and planks of wood, he has constructed a cosy shelter. He has even made a comfy hammock that overlooks the sea on one side, and his farm on another.

Whenever there is a typhoon, every bit of wood and bamboo collapses and he has to build it all over again. There is no water or electricity. Yet none of this deters Fong from making his home here. “The only power I have here is man power. I don't have anything besides those things that wash up onto the beach below,” he says.

Fong does not care for the creature comforts of his city life, instead he draws his inspiration from nature to come up with ways to improve his living and working conditions. “Sometimes, I sit and think for a long time by the sea. It's how I come up with creative ways to deal with the problems I face,” he says.

For Fong Fai-kai, living a rural life close to nature is a return to his childhood roots. But increasingly, there are younger people in Hong Kong who are also, to varying degrees, looking to nature for alternatives to the pressure-cooker of modern urban life.

At the Gaia School in Tuen Mun, teachers hope their pupils can grow up happily and healthily at their own pace. “Gaia” means “nature” in Greek, and the school adopts an educational philosophy based on the “unity of heaven and men becoming one with nature”.

On a typical day in the primary school, pupils are seen running down to the playground, the sound of their play and laughter filling the air. Some children lie on the ground, while others toss sticks into the trees. In the middle of the playground, teachers and students sweep the yellow leaves away with brooms.

Lee Yun-chung, who calls herself “Chung Chung”, is one of the founders of the Gaia Association. She believes that



Students compete in Sports Day.

much can be learned through observing and interacting with nature. Through looking at how seasons change, how the sun shines and the wind blows, many philosophies for life can be found.

She believes everyone is equal before nature, that each should have mutual respect for others. In the school, everyone is addressed by their nickname rather than courtesy titles like “Miss” or “Mister”. Pupils need not to hold back when they want to express their thoughts to teachers.

Having worked as a consultant in mainstream schools, Chung Chung has seen many students' natural desires being suppressed. Schools compete with one another, students are exam-oriented and teachers care more about academic results than students' unique characters.

Chung Chung describes people in society as balloons, “They are either being shrunk or they are about to burst.” She says people's minds are moulded to fit into the framework of industrialisation, to care about efficiency and reputation. But they do not stop to think about what they are really pursuing or why, and they



During the activity lesson, students play with the trucks.

are impatient in their interactions with others.

Yip Chung-sing, who calls himself “Starfish”, is a teacher at Gaia School. He says fame and fortune should not be the criteria to measure success. Instead, he believes in the natural division of labour: Every human being has his or her role according to their comparative skills given by nature. Therefore, jobs should not be classified as being either superior or inferior.

“Can a society operate without maintenance workers or construction workers? Certainly not,” he says.

Apart from the hierarchy in society, Starfish is also concerned that the essential meanings of many concepts have become twisted and profit-oriented. For instance, some products are branded as “environmentally friendly” as a marketing strategy to maximise profits while still using excessive packaging, and the production of some biofuels have been found to be even more detrimental to the environment.

What Fong, Chung Chung and Starfish really want is to unite with nature. They are dissatisfied with aspects of modern industrialised society and are longing for a place where each can be free and true to their hearts. However, they are not the only ones who harbour such dreams. More and more city dwellers have already realised the dangers of blindly chasing efficiency

while sacrificing other important values and human relationships.

Wong Ka-ling, 36, is one of this new breed of nature lovers. With a degree in sociology, Wong could have chosen to climb the career ladder or become an entrepreneur. Instead, she chose to be a part-time teacher in Gaia School and works on a farm in Fanling three days a week. Now in her eighth year of farming, she expresses her constant delight in the surprises nature gives her. “Look at this sunflower,” she says as she points excitedly at the huge bloom almost twice her height. “Last time I was wondering when it would blossom, now it blooms!”

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To Wong, the best thing about farming is the fulfilment gained from nurturing plants from seed. “Whenever I take a bit of food, I think of the process of growth it went through. It’s just amazing,” She says.



COURTESY OF GAIA SCHOOL

Wong has noticed that more people are longing for relaxing lifestyles and places that are closer to nature. When they choose their holiday destinations, urbanities will travel to foreign places where they can escape from the city.

It is dawning on more and more people that it is good to find subtle moments in our everyday life when we can stop for a moment and appreciate nature.

In the busy hub of Mong Kok, where crowds of people rush to and fro, there is a place where people can slow down and rest. It is green in theme with colourful paintings and plants everywhere. Soothing music plays in the background as food smells waft out from the kitchen. This place is Club O.

Through organising various activities, the chairperson of Club O, Catherine Hung Hing-ling, hopes to remind city dwellers that we need to stop and rest before resuming our busy lives with refreshed spirits. One of the activities is the devotion lunch, where participants are told to close their eyes and slowly



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feel the environment before enjoying a simple vegetarian meal.

As Hung says, living a natural life is not all about farming and living in rural areas. It is about getting people to stop work for a few minutes to connect with nature and other humans. She believes less is often more: The less we consume, the clearer and purer our minds are. It seems she is not alone; Club O now has 2,000 members.

Gaia Association founder Chung Chung has another reason for supporting the downsizing of desires. “If you reduce consumption, society will have lower demands. Labourers will then do less, go home and enjoy time with their families.”

She is constantly holding different activities at the Gaia Association to purify people’s minds like - breathing exercises, birthday thanks-givings and experiencing nature camps. These activities are gaining popularity. The

association now has close to 200 family members.

Chung Chung says living a simple life is about being ourselves without disguise. Therefore, we should spend less on clothes. “We have only two feet but how many pairs of shoes do we have? Similarly, we have only limited number of pierced holes but how many

earrings do we own? We won’t die from not buying clothes for a year,” she says.

After all, people can simply not wear jewellery or make-up. We can choose not to outdo others in order to boost our self-esteem. We can simply give thanks to nature for giving us all we need in life, and treasure those who love us and who we love. ▼



Students can act freely in Gaia School.

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