Six Hong Kong zero-waste champions – women campaigning to make the city greener

Eco-friendly pioneers leading the way on how to reduce individual waste and send less to landfill

Lauren James 3 Mar 2018

By

Dr Daisy Tam Dic-sze with her vertical allotment at Hong Kong Baptist University's Kowloon Tong campus. Picture: Jonathan Wong

More on this story

"Let me show you our garden," Dr Daisy Tam Dic-sze says, brandishing a pair of shears and beckoning as she leads the way to a wall of kale and lettuce sprouting through holes cut into plastic bottles. Over the past year, Tam has transformed a small corner of Hong Kong Baptist University's Kowloon Tong campus, where she works, into a verdant vertical allotment, the green frills bright against the faculty's grey tiled facade, even on a dreary day.

"It's an experiment I did with students to teach them about turning waste into a resource and to see what was the smallest scale of urban farming we could do," she explains, snipping off some emerald stalks to take home for dinner.

Say yes to more space, less waste: how to stay stylishly

sustainable in Hong Kong

Hers is one modest scheme in a burgeoning movement towards reducing waste to a practical minimum. In Hong Kong, as elsewhere, more and more researchers, entrepreneurs, campaigners, bloggers and others are becoming aware of the enormous damage being done to the planet by our excessive wastefulness. Tired of waiting for governments and industry to take the lead, they are taking the initiative.

One small vegetable-growing scheme might not change the world, but Tam and other like-minded Hongkongers hope such initiatives will set in motion a "zero-waste" snowball.

To affect change, you need a catchy, quick solution and someone to make it trendy, then you need to go beyond that, so it's not just a luxury offered to the middle classes [...] It's about designing a city with sustainability in mind

Dr Daisy Tam Dic-sze, environment and agriculture researcher at Hong Kong Baptist University

Tam specialises in food security and ethical food practices in Hong Kong, where leftovers constitute the largest category of waste by far. Trying to understand why excess food often becomes classified as waste, she works with redistribution NGOs to imagine the infrastructure needed to keep food out of landfills and how green practices might become feasible for everyone in the city – not just the middle class.

"I'm not interested in waste management per se," she says. "It's about how we improve the system so that waste has a longer lifespan. When you buy lettuce, you buy the whole thing, and cut salads wilt very quickly. From one seedling, I've been eating

leaves from the same lettuce plant since November. It's interesting to show students that farming is not a thing of the past."

Students turn green after learning facts of Hong Kong waste

When in the book-stacked confines of her office, Tam grapples with the more philosophical questions of waste: why should people care? What would make them care? The seed of the issue was planted more than a decade ago, when she was selling apples in London's Borough Market while pursuing a PhD in the British capital.

"As traders, we had all these leftovers that we would exchange. I had friends in the bakery, the olive store [...] There was a whole alternative economy happening after hours that added a vibrancy to the market as well as reinforcing relationships.

"After I moved back to Hong Kong, I was uprooted from that environment and was no longer part of that scene, but I still wanted to do food work. So I asked the same question, but on a city level: what happens to all the waste and the leftovers?"

Kitchen waste at a restaurant in Hong Kong. Picture: K. Y. Cheng

Tam is interested in discovering how waste-reduction practices might become routine for those who have no interest in the environment or chasing the virtuous buzz that, for zero wasters, comes with never needing to empty your rubbish bin.

“To affect change, you need a catchy, quick solution and someone to make it trendy, then you need to go beyond that, so it’s not just a luxury offered to the middle classes. Taking the moral argument and saying we have to care about the environment isn’t going to resonate with someone who works 10 or 12 hours a day, gets home after the markets have closed and is worried only about getting some food and going to bed. It’s about designing a city with sustainability in mind.”

How can Hongkongers reduce city’s food waste mountain? Revive, reuse and repurpose the produce you buy

The city's markets illustrate the point. "Are there storage spaces, fridges, a space for composting? If it's there, and they can just throw [waste] in, it'll be no problem for people to start composting. If you have to collect it, carry it, then it becomes an issue."

For all its minimalism and jettisoning of the unnecessary, zero waste is not a movement that travels light. Tam is known around the Department of Humanities for her clunking backpack of boxes and bags – the accessories of an assistant professor who practises what she teaches.

"I pack away all my food. Among my colleagues, it's almost a joke about Daisy and her food waste," the softly spoken 39-year-old smiles.

Zero waste Instagram influencer Hannah Chung. Picture: James Wendlinger

Although social media has enabled her to reach many in Hong Kong, developing the zero-waste movement beyond Instagram trends is high on the agenda of Hannah Chung. In 2016, the 31-

year-old, who that year started working for Green Monday, a Hong Kong organisation that encourages people to observe meat-free Mondays and runs the Green Common chain of shop-cafes, overhauled her lifestyle, ridding her routine of disposable plastic items – from make-up wipes to washing-up liquid – and seeking sustainable alternatives. She sent no waste to landfills for a year, documenting her progress through a stream of eco-conscious Instagram images that, she hopes, will have inspired others to join the crusade.

The zero-waste challenge in Hong Kong: we try to live plastic-free for a week

"The term 'zero waste' is quite final," she says. "You can fight to be zero waste and it'll be a very long, hard and lonely journey." Instead, for Chung, the term is a "conversation starter to get the message out there".

Chung visits schools and businesses in the city, educating others on waste reduction and consulting on corporate sustainability. "[For now], it does appeal to the expat market, people on higher disposable incomes," she says. "I've found that there's such a gap and I really want to reach out to the mass market and spread the word.

Chung takes a reusable box when shopping at the wet market. Picture: James Wendlinger

“There’s a lot of curiosity. I’ve learned a lot about plastics, the whole system we have in Hong Kong and the reason why we don’t have the incentive to recycle because it’s worth next to nothing. The rebate for two aluminium cans is 10 HK cents, whereas a kilo of plastic is worth less than 50 HK cents.”

Now, says Chung, the time is right to give up her business development role at Green Monday to launch her own social enterprise so that she can work full-time reaching out to schools and advising businesses on how to intercept waste at the source rather than focusing on recycling strategies.

Dr Christina Dean, founder and chief executive of the organisation Redress, a Hong Kong-based NGO with a mission to promote environmental sustainability in the fashion industry. Picture: Luke Casey

In 2012, Dr Christina Dean, 39, was "smacked with the reality" of clothing waste. As founder and chief executive of Hong Kong charity Redress and upcycled fashion brand The R Collective, Dean, who trained as a dentist in Britain before coming to Hong Kong, had worked to bring fashion waste into the public consciousness since 2007, but was unprepared for what she saw while filming a segment on sustainable fashion for television.

"We went to one of Hong Kong's landfills and watched lorries queue up to dump thousands of tonnes of clothes. It was depressing. If the industry is trying to improve but consumers still chuck their clothes away, what's the point?" she says.

Hong Kong fashion NGO's documentary shows progress on sustainability

Dean spent the next year dressing only in cast-off clothes. Speaking via video call from Britain, where she travels regularly, a pregnant Dean is making good use of a black-and-white tartan bomber jacket that she rescued from a Hong Kong landfill. "The shocking reality is how much waste there is out there. It's unbelievable," she says, adding with a sigh, "Globalisation is probably a great thing but, ultimately, it's just not fair."

She cites the apparel-producing industry. "You travel to China and your heart breaks. The pollution is terrible. We're looking at a public-health crisis, which is unethical."

For the charismatic, outspoken campaigner, who originally moved to Hong Kong to work as a journalist, "zero waste [...] is a lovely little phrase but it doesn't exist".

Dean at The Redress Forum Designer Challenge in 2014. Picture: Luke Casey

"For the first few years, I thought the thing was to stop buying so much crap, then I realised consumers are always going to buy clothes because they do wear out," she says. "There's no 'zero waste' because people will be buying new clothes and I'm comfortable with that. The Redress world is about cultivating a more sustainable, responsible fashion industry, whether that's from the industry side or the consumption side

or consumer care.

[How ethical fashion is growing in Asia-Pacific and five sustainable clothing brands to watch]

"There's a carrot and a stick in this movement: the carrot is simplicity – we're all searching for a simpler way of life – and the stick is that the tide has turned on consumption. Waste is now deemed vulgar and unacceptable. We're seeing millions of tonnes of unsold clothes that are being destroyed [globally]. That's becoming unpalatable, therefore consumers are being active about it and asking questions that are difficult for the industry to answer."

Such questions include: "Why don't brands give their clothes to the poor?" but, she says, "It's not as simple as that."

Zero waste [...] is a lovely little phrase but it doesn't exist

Dr Christina Dean, founder of Hong Kong charity Redress

The past few years have seen Dean draw attention to what happens to unsold clothing and she has written articles criticising its incineration. "No one really wants to take the blame for that type of fashion waste that essentially arises from trying to sell clothes that customers don't want," she wrote in October. She also runs the annual Redress Design Award to celebrate up-and-coming designers anywhere in the world who use sustainable approaches, including upcycling, zero waste and reconstruction techniques, to create new clothes.

The industry's problems are two-fold, she says. "Consumers have changed, there's been a change in values, but retailers are still over-buying. The other problem is that the fashion industry

has spent the past 15 to 20 years based on scale – the only way businesses can make money is to sell a lot."

Dean dresses only in items that are second-hand or made with upcycled fibres and describes herself as "militant" when it comes to recycling and food waste.

Paola Cortese teaches people how to reduce waste through her company, Zero Waste Life. Picture: Jonathan Wong

"It's not rocket science," says Paola Cortese, the founder of Zero Waste Life (formerly LoopUnite), a Hong Kong social enterprise that coaches paying students in how to cut down on waste through a four-weekprogramme.

The first week, Cortese says, focuses on assessing the impact of an individual's waste; the second is about finding solutions; in the third, recycling and composting strategies are outlined; and the fourth is devoted to a recap and a deeper dive into any areas the student wants to address.

The Indonesian-born former interior designer claims an "80 per cent reduction" in personal waste can be achieved through adoption of "the five essentials": a lunchbox, a reusable bag, a liquid container, a handkerchief and non-plastic cutlery.

Our goal is to raise awareness that being sustainable is a life skill and it's not hard [...] It's something we need to get accustomed to

Paola Cortese, founder of Zero Waste Life

Had global leaders been able to foresee the mounting devastation caused to our oceans by plastic, enterprises such as Cortese's might never have been needed. Taking her cue from the glass jars of rubbish that act as yardsticks for eco dedication – French-born zero-waste queen Bea Johnson and her family fill just one a year – Cortese began her own, collecting just 289 grams of waste throughout the whole of last year, and soon found herself fielding questions from friends seeking help with their own waste output.

All your household waste can fit in a jar, according to this Hong Kong start-up

Whether she's holding a group workshop, working with a client in their home, sprinkling soil enhancer made from her vegetable peelings on plants while hiking or simply reminding her husband to take a cloth bag to work should he need to buy groceries on his way home, Cortese has placed waste consciousness at the heart of everything she does – and predicts that future generations will do the same.

"Our goal is to raise awareness that being sustainable is a life skill and it's not hard [...] It's something we need to get accustomed to, like we grew up learning how to swim or how to

drive. The next generation needs to grow up learning to live sustainably, and that sustainable living should be considered the norm.

“If not, I don’t think humanity will survive.”

Fanny Moritz, founder of No!w No Waste, an online shop selling no-waste household goods. Picture: Jonathan WONG

Fanny Moritz has developed an allergy to plastic, or at least that’s what she tells staff in restaurants when refusing drink stirrers and straws – items that have become symbolic of single-use superfluity.

“I dined at the same Italian restaurant three times, and each time I asked for no straw in my lemonade, but they always gave me one.” When she took it up with the waitress, the straw was removed from her drink and binned. “Now I say I’m allergic and it works – I went back yesterday and no straw!” says the web designer and founder of No!w No Waste, an online shop selling

no-waste household goods such as beeswax food wrap, menstrual cups, reusable foodware and solid shampoo blocks.

Hong Kong throws away 5.2 million bottles every single day – is it time to ban sale of the plastic disposables?

Moritz, 29, who first moved to Hong Kong as a model on a three-month contract, calculates that she has shifted enough steel straws to divert more than 26,000 plastic straws from landfills, as well as having saved them from countless disposable cups, cotton swabs, tampons and shampoo bottles.

The zero-waste movement has a glamorous role model in Moritz, who is warm and breezy, with a laugh that rings out across The Hive co-working space in Kennedy Town, from where she runs her business.

Seeing Johnson's waste wedged into a single jar motivated Moritz to search for sustainable items, but she couldn't locate anything other than eco toothbrushes and straws.

'Zero waste' queen on the five Rs of her eco-friendly lifestyle: refuse, reduce, reuse, recycle and rot

"After I read Bea's book [*Zero Waste Home*, 2013], I thought, 'I know how to do websites and I'm very passionate about this lifestyle, as well as minimalism – not owning too many things.'"

Moritz hosted her hero when Johnson visited Hong Kong in January, to give a talk to a Landmark Mandarin room full of converts. In the audience, Tamsin Thornburrow nervously raised her hand and revealed she was about to open a shop that would sell not only cleaning products and cosmetics without packaging, like Moritz's, but would also venture into bulk

groceries. Addressing the audience, Johnson declared, "If no one in this room supports this young lady then she's going to fail within a year."

Live Zero founder Tamsin Thornburrow in her zero waste shop in Sai Ying Pun. Pucture: Winson Wong

Live Zero, in Sai Ying Pun, opened its doors on February 1, and business has been brisk in the weeks since. The shop is designed to make bulk grocery shopping look stylish, with pastel-painted, upcycled wooden dressers holding jars and containers donated by customers for others to use. The walls are stacked with large plastic dispensers filled with dried foodstuffs alongside shelves packed with eco-friendly household items.

Zero-waste, packaging-free Hong Kong food store takes on supermarkets with eco-friendly goods

At the end of the store's third week of operation, Thornburrow is rushed off her feet, fielding queries and demonstrating how

the weigh-fill-weigh self-service system works. Having had the spotlight on her at the Johnson talk, press interviews followed and she has gained 6,500 Instagram followers since the opening.

"I'm finding all the attention unusual but, obviously, it's been good for business," says the placid 25-year-old, who sees customers off with a singsong "thank you". "Everyone's been thankful! I've had like, five selfies [taken with customers]. Now I'm worried about what will happen if I go to the supermarket and pick up something plastic," she laughs. "What if one of my customers sees!"

Bulk bins filled with food at Live Zero. Picture: Jonathan WONG

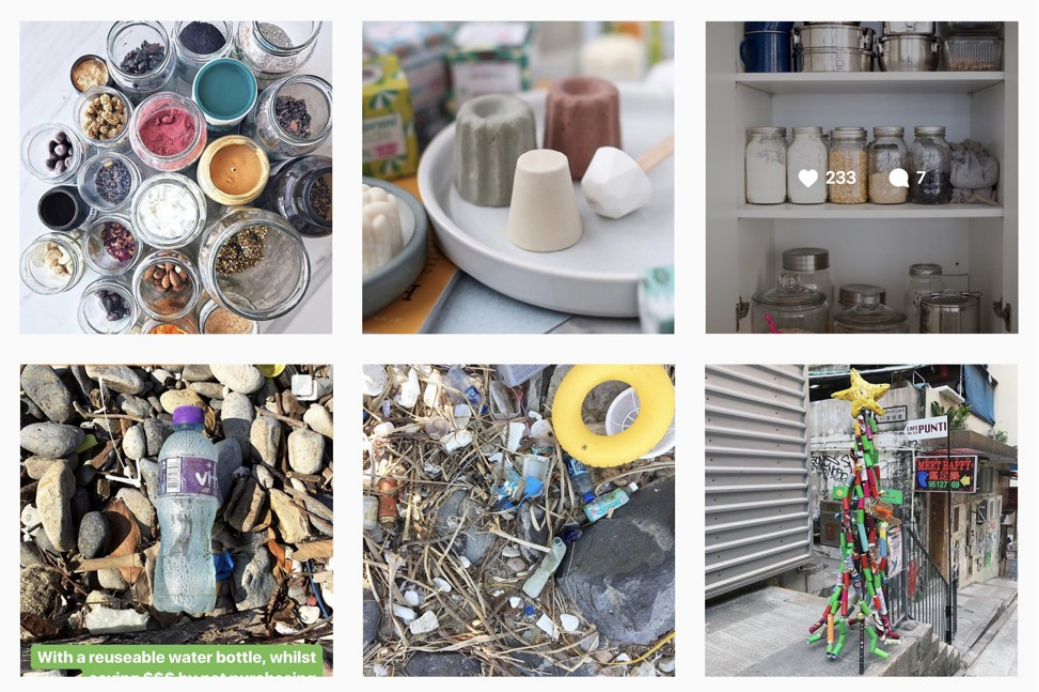
Already the owner of homeware shop Thorn and Burrow, the former interior designer was well-placed to establish a physical premises, while her peers sell mostly online. She rented a small unit in design hub PMQ to house Live Zero, and received such an enthusiastic response that she decided to move to a permanent home in a bigger space where she could also sell food. Her

marketing strategy is based on a belief that the zero-waste movement's proliferation is inextricably linked to its aesthetic appeal; her Instagram feed is dotted with brightly coloured coffee cups and rows of neatly arranged products contrasted with rubbish-strewn beaches and piles of individually wrapped bananas.

Individually wrapped apples on sale at City'super in Causeway Bay. Picture: SCMP

Thornburrow's interest in green enterprise grew from her observing a growing yet unmet demand for eco homewares in Hong Kong and from an exasperation at the mountain of plastic wrap that accompanied each delivery to her business. It started with a hunt for a water bottle that was both practical and beautiful enough for her to want to use, and grew into a line of packaging-free products – including beeswax wraps that can be used in place of cling film and steel straws – that were hard to find in Hong Kong.

She also caters to those who, like her, are frustrated at not being able to afford organic produce, offering a selection of dried pulses, pasta, nuts and oils.



Images taken from @livezero.hk's Instagram page.

For many who extol the virtues of zero waste, there exists a belief that living a greener existence is good not only for the environment but also for the soul. For Thornburrow, it's the sense of achievement she feels every time she rejects a plastic bag or welcomes a curious passer-by into her shop, and for Moritz, it's hearing that she has inspired another person to give zero waste a try.

"People need something more meaningful in their lives; we've become more aware of our connectedness in the past few years," Moritz says. "Even if it wasn't trendy, we'd be heading this way, for sure."

Related articles

The best way Cortese can sum up her passion is by drawing on

the teachings of Gandhi: “It brings me more happiness in life. It means that whatever I think, do and say is now in harmony,” she says. “That’s what zero waste is to me.”