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# Healing Nature

## *Spiritual Ecology, Self-Cultivation, and Social Transformation in Hong Kong*

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### Abstract

This paper provides the first ethnographic study of spiritual ecology in contemporary Hong Kong. In exploring the life stories of people who wanted to “heal” nature as well as those who were being “healed” by nature through the practice of green living, this paper illuminates the interconnection between self-transformation and social transformation within the green living circle. While the first form of self-transformation occurs when individuals consciously responded to green groups’ appeals to cultivating themselves for the environment, the second mode of self-transformation happens unintentionally as people developed an interest in green living. In conclusion, I argue that the spiritual-ecological practices under the umbrella of green living offered people in Hong Kong a means to introspect, re-organize, and even transform their lives during difficult life events and challenging life transition. In turn, the emotional and spiritual experience of self-transformation not only reinforced people’s faith in the power of nature, such positive experience was also key to perpetuating their interest and efforts in greening Hong Kong and the world beyond.

### Keywords

spiritual ecology – environmentalism – self-cultivation – life transition – Hong Kong – China – social movement

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## 1 Introduction

For more than a decade, the green group Club O hosted a weekly public event called “healing night” at its base in Mong Kok,<sup>1</sup> Hong Kong. The event usually consisted of a healing lesson delivered by an invited speaker, and a collective session akin to what we might call a “group therapy”, where participants were encouraged to share their pain, experience, and wisdom with others. I remember in one of the healing lessons, Pierre, a spiritual environmentalist and regular speaker for Club O, shared with us his epiphany when living in an eco-village in Scotland: “It was like an adventure of consciousness.” Pierre reminisced. “I learned in the eco-village that the longest journey for a human being is from the head to the heart. Green living can be a compass for that journey.”

The “head”, apparently, is a shorthand 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” denotes one’s spirituality and the “deep emotional side of humanity” (Anderson 1996: viii). After spending 8 years in the eco-village, Pierre was confident that green living—an emerging way of living that is considered kind to the Earth and good to the people (Lou 2017)—is what it takes to lead people to their hearts. Once they get there, he said, their emotional and spiritual awakening would guide them to relate to nature, society, and their selves in new ways that hard facts and rationality can’t.

Since the 1990s, proponents of spiritual ecology have argued that secular approaches are insufficient to resolve the environmental crisis (Tucker & Grim 1993; Tucker & Grim 2001; Gottlieb 2006; Taylor 2007; Sponsel 2012), but the quiet revolution of spiritual ecology could profoundly transform how individuals and societies relate to nature and turn things around for the better. As Leslie Sponsel elaborates in his seminal 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

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1 Street and place names follow government spellings, such as Central, Mong Kok, the New Territories. To protect my interlocutors’ identity, I use pseudonyms for all people’s names except public figures whose stories have already been made public by the media.

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 mainly advocated by three actors: Simon Chau, a pioneering environmentalist, interfaith new ager, and founder of Club O; Brother Au, a simple living proponent and Catholic; Tzu Chi, a Buddhist charity founded by Master Cheng Yen in Taiwan. Of the three, the Buddhist concept of “spiritual environmentalism” (*xinling huanbao*)<sup>2</sup> is probably the most well-established example of spiritual ecology in Chinese societies. The term was first coined by the Taiwanese Buddhist monk Master Sheng-yen (*Sheng Yan fashi*), founder of the famous Dharma Drum Mountain, who espouses that when one’s *xinling* (heart/mind/spirituality) or inner environment is purified (*zing faa*), so will the external environment (Clippard 2012). But if the self or the heart is not transformed, Dharma Master Sheng-yen cautioned, environmental protection is merely a tokenism.

This paper is an ethnographic study of spiritual ecology in contemporary Hong Kong. Although in recent years, research on spiritual environmentalism in Asia is on the rise, they tend to focus on the ways “main Asian religions”, especially “Animism, Buddhism, Daoism, Hinduism, Islam, and Jainism” (Sponse 2020: 2), inform environmental activism in Asian countries. Take China as an example, Lemche and Miller have examined the Chinese Daoist Association’s green agenda (2019); Coggins (2014; 2019) and Bruun (2014) on *fengshui* and ecology; Yeh (2014) on Buddhism and environmental protection in Tibetan culture. While this approach does bring to light a grossly neglected subject and fill a much-needed gap in the scholarship of environmental activism, it sometimes misses the point that the religious landscape in Asia is a result of complex hybridisation. Although scholars of religious studies typically “distinguish among at least four Chinese religious traditions: the popular religion, Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism” (Shahar & Weller 1996:1–2), anthropologists contend that if we look at these religions beyond the canonical scriptures of institutional religions and focus on the “praxis of religion in daily life”, (Shahar & Weller, 1996: 2), we will see that both institutional and popular religions “merge into a much less differentiated lay religion” (Shahar & Weller, 1996:2). This characteristic is particularly pronounced in the case of Hong Kong—a

2 This paper follows the Jyutping System for Cantonese Romanisation. For the convenience of typesetting, I omit the tone numbers in all romanisation. In exceptional cases, some Chinese concepts are presented in Hanyu Pinyin (e.g., *tianren heyi*). All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

society well known for its hybrid cultures (Chan 2012; Ip 1998; Fung 2007). Indeed, from traditional Daoist health cultivation to new age energy healing, green living in Hong Kong consists of a wide range of spiritual practices that cannot be boiled down to one “Asian religion”.

In light of this, my paper seeks to contribute to the field of religions, spirituality, and ecological sustainability in China (Miller, Yu, & van der Veer 2014) in three ways. First, by presenting the first ethnographic case study of spiritual ecology in Hong Kong. Although Hong Kong is rarely associated with ideas and ideals of “nature”, it is arguably the most cosmopolitan and hybrid society in China in terms of religious and spiritual practices. Second, instead of focusing on a single religious tradition, this paper joins other scholars in the field to showcase “the diversity of [spiritual] narratives and worldviews that inform contemporary Chinese understandings of and engagements with nature and environment” (Miller, Yu, & van der Veer 2014). Last but not least, in telling the stories of individuals whose lives were transformed as they sought to transform Hong Kong into a green and sustainable society, my research illuminates the interconnection between self-transformation and social transformation in Hong Kong through two modes of self-transformation within the green living circle. The first form of self-transformation occurs when individuals consciously responded to green groups and the green living exemplars’ appeals to cultivate themselves for environmental protection. By contrast, the second mode of self-transformation happens unintendedly as people developed an interest in green living during special life events and life-course transition. The title of this paper—“healing nature”—is a pun to describe the interplay of these two modes of self-transformation. When healing is a verb, it indicates humans’ effort to undo their harm to the environment, but when healing is an adjective, it is nature, or more precisely, the practice of green living, that has the power to heal people. I argue that the perceived reciprocity and interdependence between one’s spiritual and physical environment, along with the shifting focus from external problems to the inner self, are what distinguish the green living movement from earlier environmental movements and the more recent political protests that entrust the possibilities of changes to largely external factors.

## 2 Cultivating Self for the Environment

The first mode of self-transformation occurs when individuals consciously responded to green groups’ appeals to cultivate themselves for the environment. 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* tradition<sup>3</sup> (i.e., traditional Chinese medicine, Ayurveda, Reiki etc.), 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 they regard as the first step towards healing nature. These activities run weekly, with most of them 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 are not continuations of past traditions, but rather “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 practised 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 has taken over the organization and been serving free meals to the public three times a week for more than a decade now.

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

3 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.

It was a Saturday afternoon. By the time I arrived, there were already 39 people in the room, almost all of them were women in their middle age. 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 nut. The second dish was a lettuce and pineapple salad 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 at 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 wellbeing—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 started eating. 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 like in the Zen monastery. In Hong Kong, the U.S.-originated principle of “leave no trace”<sup>4</sup> was applied by the green people not only during outings in the country park, but also at their dining tables.

4 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 Gregory and Alagona (2009).

When the Japanese Ōryōki was adapted into the Zen meal by the Hong Kong Vegetarian Society in 1996, it sought 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 flavor 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 called it, Brother Au's Simple Living Camp in Sai Kung is where the green people considered pure land in 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-saving as an example. While it is not uncommon that people save water by taking a shorter shower or reusing grey water, Brother Au went a step further to ensure that every drop matters. To demonstrate how little water people need every time they turn on the tap, he invented "water meditation" (*sik seoi sauhang*), a technique that uses an old water bottle to save water. Without tap water installed in the Simple Living Camp, Brother Au set up his own "running water" device with plastic water bottles collected from waste bins. After filling the bottle with water, he carefully pierced two small holes at the bottom of the bottles for water to flow through. The fine streams that come out from the holes not only serve as a sharp contrast to the running water in modern bathrooms, they force people to reflect on their wasteful behaviours in their everyday 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 no cleaning would be required 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 spilling and dripping when we pour, we can use a chopstick to lead the liquid toward the direction we want", the former chemist explained. In Brother Au's view, doing environmental protection at the dining table is a more advanced form of environmentalism. The practice is not about cleanliness, of course. It is about enhancing people's awareness of wastefulness. In simple living, every drop counts (Lou 2019).

Groups and organizations like Club O, the Simple Living Camp, and Tzu Chi were considered by the green people in Hong Kong as a *sauhang doucoeng*, a Buddhist concept referring to a place where people can cultivate themselves. Wherever one chooses to cultivate their selves 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 requires deep introspection. We have to 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 any rules to tell you what's green and what's not. You'll naturally do the right things for the environment."

Helen, a 27-year-old volunteer at Club O, went even further. Recently converted from Christianity to Buddhism after attending several of Club O's interfaith lectures, Helen said the spiritual side of green living had renewed her understanding of human's relationship to nature. "The kind of green living that we advocate at Club O is not about recycling. If you do, that's great. But they are the superficial things. Green living is much deeper than that. Ultimately, green living is about spirituality (*sam ling*). It's about whether you think humans are on the top of the pyramid, or we're just one of the many species sharing the Earth." Buddhism had also radically shaped her understanding 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 the Buddhist temporal cosmology. In Sanskrit, they are Vivartakalpa, Vivartasthāyikalpa, Samvartakalpa, Samvartasthāyikalpa, meaning the beginning of things (*sing*), the temporal stability (*zyu*), the deterioration (*waai*), and the eventual emptiness (*hung*). "That is the law of universe (*jyu zau dik kwai leot*). There is nothing we can do to prevent it. Sooner or later the Earth is going to die (*mit mong*). Environmental protection (*waanbao*) just slows down the process."

Helen's view was not completely unreasonable if you look at it from an environmental science perspective: 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), I was still astonished by her apocalyptic view. If we accept such a "pessimistic" outlook of the Earth, why should we bother with green living? Mr. Chiu, a founding member of Club O, quickly pointed out my "blind spot". "Green living is not about saving the Earth out there. It is about changing the 'earth' in you (*zi gei dik tou joeng*). We can't change the world, but we can change ourselves. Focusing on the external is a waste of energy. The ultimate solution



of the world's problems is to deal with your own problems first." Helen nodded her head, "I can't agree more. The Earth doesn't need our saving. We do!"

### 3 Recycling Self in a Buddhist Charity

Besides Club O and the Simple Living Camp, the Buddhist Organization Tzu Chi is another key advocate of 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 portion of their resources to environmental protection, recycling, and upcycling. In 2009, the Hong Kong branch of Tzu Chi set up its first Environmental Education Station in an effort to replicate Taiwan's successful recycling scheme. Thanks to the help of its volunteers, as of 2013, Tzu Chi had set up over 20 recycling points and three Environmental Education Stations in Hong Kong. "Master Cheng-yen (*Zheng Yan fashi*) teaches us to save the Earth with our hands. But we do it not only for our Master, we do it because we think we should. We are all part of this Earth. We should leave a clean Earth to our descendants."

Overhearing our conversation, Cheung *sihing* joined in: "We also want to reduce disasters. Buddhism thinks disasters are man-made (*jan wai*). For example, climate change is resulted from our greed and selfishness. We overspent because we are ungrateful (*bat sik fuk*)." "Indeed," Dai *sihing* uttered. "We have been polluting the Earth ever since we were born. But we can compensate for past wrongs, to heal nature."

How?

"It's very simple. You can do it in your everyday life." Dai *sihing* said. "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 (*gungung popo*) from participating in environmental protection. Many *gungung popo* told me, 'Aiya, I can't do it! I have little education (*duk dak syu siu*)'. But in reality, they do not have as much education as you, but we still give them an opportunity to participate. We want them to think: Although I am only a housewife, there is still something that I can do to heal the Earth. I can collect bottles and bring them to Tzu Chi for recycling! Trust me, everyone can do it. It's more practical and more effective than just writing about it!"

Like Club O, Tzu Chi was run almost entirely by volunteers like Dai *sihing* and Cheung *sihing*. The difference though, was that volunteers in Tzu Chi are called *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 bot-

tom compound of the character *zi* is the 'heart.'" Dai *sihing* tried to elucidate the difference to me by writing the two Chinese characters on a piece of paper, "so you see, our volunteers dedicated their hearts to their work, but they are not just serving us. Most of them feel they've got something out of this process, too."

Cheung *sihing* said he was one of those people whose life was transformed through sorting garbage at Tzu Chi. Humorous, bubbly, and personable, who would have thought this man in front of me was once a triad member. "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 thug you see in classic Hong Kong gangster movies. There were no dragon tattoos on his arms and his hair was not dyed blonde. He just looked like an ordinary man in his early 60s.

When Cheung *sihing* met his wife—"the soulmate of his life"—he decided to settle down for her. "My wife is an ordinary woman wanting an ordinary life. She didn't want me to be in the triad, so I left." After they got married, the couple run a small family business. Although everything looked fine on the surface, they felt deeply troubled inside. The past continued to haunt them, and his wife had suffered from a severe form of phobia. She was afraid of ghosts, spirits, hospitals, and funeral homes—anything that might bring them bad luck. When his father was on his deathbed in the hospital, his wife couldn't go near his bed. That was a wake-up call for them. They knew they needed help.

One day, the couple came across a television speech from Master Cheng-yen, the founder of Tzu Chi, and decided to seek solace from the Buddhist organization. The first assignment Tzu Chi gave them was to volunteer at hospitals. Given Mrs. Cheung's phobia, it seemed an impossible task at first, but she eventually accepted that life is impermanent and that fear won't change this fact.

His wife's transformation had greatly boosted Cheung *sihing's* confidence in Buddhism. So as soon as he reached retirement, he devoted his entire time to volunteering at Tzu Chi, working mostly on recycling.

Compared to the volunteering work at the hospitals, Cheung *sihing* said it was the work of environmental protection that made him who he is today. When he volunteered at the hospital, Cheung *sihing* said he still had a "I am helping you" kind of mentality. But the work of environmental protection had humbled him and made 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 to pick up trash on the street, I was afraid of bumping into friends and families. I didn't know what others would think of me. I worried they would think I was crazy or destitute. The recycling work at Tzu Chi taught me to let go of my ego. I thought I am recycling for Tzu Chi, but it is Tzu Chi that is recycling me."

## 4 Healing through Green Living

### 4.1 *Life Transition*

The second mode of self-transformation occurs as a by-product of practising green living amid a life event or during life-course transition. Life adversities and life transitions are critical points that force people to pause and rethink their current ways of living. As such, I had encountered many people during fieldwork who had developed an interest in green living not because they heard about the starving polar bears or the melting Arctic Sea, but because they were undergoing a difficult life event or a life-course transition.

The *si nai* (a colloquial term for “housewives” in Hong Kong) in northeast New Territories were some of the first people who brought my attention to the therapeutic power of green living. Like their counterparts in the Homemakers Union in Taiwan, 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 have 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). On the other hand, Lu’s research showed that women in the Homemakers Union had more power 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 was not what got them into 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 a sustenance (*gei tok*) and a means to reconnect to the 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 look 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 the Earth and good for the families.”

After the birth of their first child, both Emily and Ah-Gyun became enthusiastic about green living, which has given them an opportunity to shed the mildly derogatory label of *si nai* and wear the halo of a green woman activist. But they said that was not their main motivation of 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 a few other *si nai* at the vegetable collection place for their Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) group.

“You know music therapy or garden therapy? Like that. You lost your senses of self (*mou zo zi gei*) when you became a mother.”

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

After the CSA crowd dispersed, Emily confided with me her struggle of being a mother and a housewife all these years:

You know why some women killed their babies? I know why. Because they couldn'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 have depression.

You asked me why I like green living. Because I think people need to go out of their apartments, to see nature, and to meet people. People need to stay in touch with the society. When your entire focus is the domestic, you would 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 understand. So how dare they ... how dare they said I am a nagger!

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

In addition to childbirth, work transition was another impetus for going green. Married without children, 55-year-old Mary spent most of her after-work hours on the promotion of green living because she regretted how she had lived her life in her early 40s. “I was a *neoi koeng jan* (successful career woman) and I worked 9-to-9 for 10 years. I devoted myself—100 percent—to that job. Then the company went bankrupt and it fired me. I wasted 10 years of my life with this ruthless company. What have I gained? What contribution have I made to the society? Do I want to live my next 10 years the same way?”

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

In contrast, Esther's career was so successful that she was able to take an 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 travel for work, I have an agreement with my husband that I won't call him and he won't call me. That way I can focus on my work and forget that I am a married woman with family responsibilities.”

The turning point came on the day of her son's one-year's old birthday. "I had to travel frequently for work. On his one-year's old birthday, I was in New York, trying to catch the flight to San Francisco to 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 happened within five minutes. Then everyone left as it was near midnight. I felt so bad."

Since the birthday party, Esther had yearned to return to her slower and greener root. "I grew up in a village in the New Territories. You can say I grew up in nature. I'm not afraid of bees and I ran around with bare feet. But I left my roots to pursuit a materially richer life." So as soon as she paid off her mortgage, she reduced her work hours and devoted most of her time to green living. She even used her network and influence to help the business of 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. In the end of the day, we all breathe the same air."

#### 4.2 *Illness of the Heart*

Not only did green living offer consolation to people undergoing life transitions such as childbirth and redundancy, illness is also a catalyst for many people to go green in Hong Kong. From minor ailments like back pain and eczema to more serious cases of cancer and Parkinson's Disease, many green people first went into green living following a physical or emotional sickness. As one cancer survivor told me: "People in Club O said vegetarianism might be good for my health, so I gave it a try. It was only after I became a vegetarian that I learned about the cruelty and unsustainability of industrialized meat production."

Similarly, Joanne had her green revelation when she was hospitalized a few years ago. "When I was lying on the hospital bed, I sobbed. Look what I have done to my body and my soul! When God gave me life, He gave me perfect health. Just as when He created Earth, everything was in harmony." After her recovery, Joanne decided to follow in the footsteps of a respectable priest to promote vegetarianism and green living in the Catholic churches in Hong Kong.

Although Club O is known as a green living education foundation, most of its events and activities were about human health and wellbeing. People from

the outside may even describe Club O as health first and environment second. Club O uses health and Asian philosophy as entry points to introduce people to green living (Choy 2011: 9) because its founder Simon Chau knew too well that “abstract appeals to the well-being of ‘nature’ are not likely to work” in Chinese societies<sup>5</sup> (Weller and Bol 1998, 337). Failing to acknowledge that human wellbeing is at least as important as ecological wellbeing was a major reason why international green groups were unable to mobilize Hong Kong people to participate in their environmental movement (Lou 2022: 115).

However, it’s important to note that such orientation is not just a pragmatic strategy to attract more members and 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 practise the following: Micro-wellbeing (personal health concerns) and Macro-wellbeing (ecological concerns).

Almost a decade before the public health professionals in the West called 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

5 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).

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 called Jane to the group. Jane was 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 were pouring in. Some people tried to console her by saying that nothing is permanent, so is 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 call such emotional sickness *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 people, 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, 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 relationship. 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 were also trying to heal their relationships with others. In other words, green living heals these people by endowing them with a new lens to rethink how to relate to the Other, whether it was to another person, to nature, or the society at large. This is a crucial point, as it illustrates that green living is more than a neoliberal and individualistic device of self-help.

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. "My *sam beng* was I used to think others were in the wrong; that they owed me something. These negative emotions gave me migraine. But since I started meditating, I realised that it's all about my attitudes. I stop blaming others and begin to see my own problems. Once you sort out your *sam beng*, your negative emotions will be gone, and your health will improve."

Except 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 really low self-esteem. I got bullied by my peers a lot. My interpersonal relationships were terrible, so was my relationship with myself. I was really depressed and had suicidal thoughts every night. When you can't even come to term with yourself, how can you have a good relationship with others, with the environment, or 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 a women-only organization similar to the Homemakers Union. "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 the 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 taught her green living, Amanda picked up meditation, Zen eating, and spiritual cultivation almost instantly. Their trips to the Gaia School, the green kitchen and the meditation lessons that they run, have 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 experi-



ence (*zik cyun dik gingjim*) over the years. “I just wasn’t motivated to integrate them in 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 my self. 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 with me 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 my tantrum. 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. As 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.”

## 5 Conclusion: Spiritual Environmentalism in Hong Kong and Beyond

Why do people go green? What motivate 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 happen?

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 behavioural changes. That is why the affective power of role modelling 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, a

prominent affective nature educator<sup>6</sup> in Hong Kong, 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 in the opening of this paper, 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 paper 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”. More problematically, “the meaning and impact for those involved and the potential transformative effects it has on their lives risk being entirely discounted if the overall movement or campaign is judged a failure” (Cox 2023, 49). As a result, we don’t really 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 has been on the rise, it tends to be examined in light of governed subjects (Agrawal 2005a; Agrawal 2005b) exempt from emotions and life histories. However, as scholars have increasingly stressed, a person’s affective, emotional, and spiritual experiences play a pivotal role in the formation of environmental subjectivity (Milton, 2002; Norgaard, 2011; Sponsel, 2012). Without emotion, there would be “no commitment, no motivation, no action” (Milton, 2003:150). As I have demonstrated in this paper, 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, such positive experience was also key to perpetuating their interest and efforts in greening Hong Kong and the world beyond.

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6 Nature Affective Education (*cing ji zijin gaaujuk*) can be traced back to the book series *Sharing Nature with Children*, written by the American nature educator Joseph Bharat Cornell to promote outdoor learning in the early 1970s. In Hong Kong, the NAE educational program was organized by the Gaia Association through an annually run Earth Walkers Program (*daai dei hang ze gai waak*).

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