

Big Spender in Hong Kong Turns Environmental Volunteer

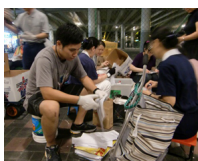
Written by Tzu Chi Foundation

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When dusk falls in the Mei Foo district of Hong Kong, Qiu Ya-wen (邱雅文) begins her routine – she goes to the outside of an apartment building where an elegant elderly woman is waiting for her. The woman gives her newspapers and plastic bottles. “The old lady sought me out herself at the recycling site in the evening. She is more than 80 years old. I come to her house before I go to the site and start work,” said Qiu. The old lady lives in a nice home; she had read of Tzu Chi’s recycling in a local newspaper and went to visit the volunteers. Then she started recycling at home, storing the plastic bottles she had cleaned behind a chair in one of the rooms, so as not to take up space and give no trouble to her daughter. “When you see how hard-working she is, you feel her energy,” said Qiu. “How can I do less than her?”

A native of Taiwan, Qiu used to spend her days shopping, having afternoon tea and watching films. For her, Hong Kong was a shopper’s paradise. But, one day in May 2008, she came out of a supermarket and saw the blue and white uniforms of the Tzu Chi volunteers, with whom she had donated money for more than 10 years in Taiwan. Her heart was touched – and now she has changed her life, devoting her time to the sick and needy and doing recycling.



It was in 2003 that Qiu moved from Taiwan to Hong Kong when her husband took up a new job there. The family had a comfortable life. “I was determined not to be bored,” she said. “When my husband went to the office and my children to school, I spent the day shopping like crazy, having afternoon tea and watching films. How well I organized my life.” She quickly adapted to Hong Kong and found out the best places to shop and eat; she could understand and speak Cantonese. But, despite all this, she felt like a stranger, that it was not her own place.

Her life changed on May 5, 2008. When she came out of a supermarket, she saw the group of volunteers in the uniform she knew so well. “Are you from Tzu Chi?” she asked. They welcomed her and invited her to join a Buddha Day Ceremony the next day; the bond was re-established. “The result is that, a few days later, the 2008 Sichuan earthquake happened,” she said. She helped the volunteers collect money for the survivors; a former nurse, she joined the foundation’s Hong Kong medical team. Step by step, she received training and certified as a Tzu Chi commissioner. “Working in Tzu Chi, I hear Taiwanese and have a sense of coming home. But my biggest fear was recycling. Every time I saw the volunteers cleaning plastic bottles and collecting newspapers, sweat streaming down their backs, I thought to myself – ‘please do not ask me to do recycling!’”

Then she returned to Taiwan to take part in a training camp and took part in a recycling class. For the first time, she had to twist her back into sorting plastic bottles and making piles of newspaper – and her heart suddenly felt at ease. “When I did recycling, I deeply felt what Master Cheng Yen often says ‘time is running out’”. From that moment, she was transformed:

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the person who was fond to sleep and feared hard work became the one whose passion was recycling.



Every Friday evening, in the Hong Kong district of Mei Foo where they live, the volunteers set up a recycling table. She and her husband push a trolley to collect items from a nearby fruit stall; the vendor specially keeps for them the boxes in which he stores the fruit. "Some of these boxes do not need to be tied together. They can be piled very cleanly," she said. Her next stop is a Chinese medicine shop; the owner, Mr Xu keeps boxes in one corner in which he puts newspapers left on the street. He ingeniously covers them with a tablecloth on which he puts the medicines he is going to sell; this is the best use of space. Mr Xu said: "My monthly rent for this shop is HK\$30,000. You go to such an expensive shop to do recycling!" Qiu said: "HK\$30,000 is equal to NT\$200,000. Mr Xu's shop has just five ping (16.5 square meters). Just storing the medicine means that space is very tight – still he supports recycling. We have no reason to give up." Her physical exhaustion became a source of happiness. No matter where she goes, she finds everyone is working to keep their own place clean and practice recycling; she feels from others the purest love which turns the loneliness of a foreign place into the warmth of her hometown.

Qiu Ya-wen has been transformed from a big spender into a recycling volunteer. The shops, restaurants and hairdressers that used to serve her as a client are now giving her their recyclables. One coffee shop keeps the plastic glasses, newspapers and out-of-date magazines left by its customers to give to her at closing time. If you do not see Sister Qiu recycling at home or collecting goods on the street, she will be at the Hong Kong branch preparing for the next TIMA clinic or going to visit someone who needs care. The work of a volunteer has replaced shopping and afternoon tea as the centre of her life.

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