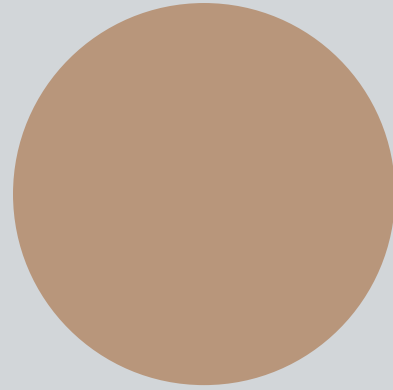


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A ONE-MAN
SOCIAL
ENTERPRISE,
A HALF-GREEN
LIFE

SHARE FARMING COMMUNITY -
LAI HIU FUNG WILLIAM





A Salvation Army service building can be found at the edge of Shek Kip Mei where old housing estates like Tai Hang West, Tai Hang East, and Nam Shan Estate are, and next to the luxury villas of Yau Yat Tsuen. William was carefully watering plants in the rectangular open garden in front of the building on the right, checking the leaves and branches of the plants.

The area is like a forgotten place. The stores, the buildings, and the environment have remained the same as they were in the 1960s and 70s. In this refreshing and open piece of land, birds sing and trees flourish. The Salvation Army has lent this piece

of land to William's SHARE Farming Community and it has become William's "base".

“ We see endless expansion of cities, population growth, various types of pollution, food crisis, spiritual deprivation, “diseases of civilisation”, and many more issues in the world. Urban farming has emerged as an “antidote” to these issues. It was first practised in the United States in the early 20th century, and then spread to the United Kingdom. In recent years, it has become more widespread and well-known. In Hong Kong, innovators and business models that promote urban farming have started to appear. One entrant to the industry has walked out from an enclosed white cube into the sunlight, peacefully accompanying his growing vegetables in solitude.

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WHEN ORIGINALITY MEETS REALITY

The garden has more than 40 planting boxes in rows with herbs, seasonal fruits, and vegetables. Besides tending to the crops, William teaches farming classes, rents out planting boxes to the public, organises guided tours, and attends to the greening of the building. But according to William, it is a small-scale business that focuses on community work, so there is not much promotion or large-scale activities at the moment. People who live in the neighbourhood would pass by, see him tending to the plants from outside the fence, feel interested, and then approach him to sign up for classes. Most of the participants are families or retirees.

He has the flexible aura of a farmer, but his skin tone and appearance are no different from a city dweller. He has been working as a radiographer in a hospital for 10 years, operating equipment for X-ray, MRT, and CT in an enclosed space every day; he described his job as boring and stagnant. Yet, he has a lively mind and loves to help people by nature. In addition to working in the medical field, he often does voluntary

work to help others. Over the years, he had seen many non-profit organisations struggling to apply for grants and funding, which left him wondering if he could establish a business model and earn money to help people.

So, he began to study social entrepreneurship, enrolling in the Social Entrepreneurship Programme at the University of Hong Kong (HKU) and later in Good Seed. He tried urban farming as part of his social entrepreneurship coursework at HKU. In the beginning, he had an ambitious goal. He aspired to bring together the disadvantaged to learn and manage a farm, and he envisioned growing and mass-producing crops all around Hong Kong on rooftops, terraces, and in indoor areas. He also wanted to develop areas for renting out planting boxes for people who were interested.

“My mentor at the time thought it was a promising idea and was confident that it would bring considerable income.”

But it was not easy to actualise his ideas. At first, he set up a community farm with three other Good Seed participants whom he did not know.

“But they eventually dropped out and I was left alone. I then reached out to a friend who was experienced in farming to be one of the founders. Later, this friend had other plans to pursue so I went back to being alone again. I do all the bookkeeping, accounting, and monthly reports for Good Seed myself,”

he laughed bitterly.

The only caretakers of the farm are William, a handful of young people with low academic qualifications trained during Good Seed’s funding period, and retiree volunteers. Besides, William has observed that many people find farming interesting, but when it comes to paying for classes or spending time taking care of plants regularly, it is a different story. The business has remained small with limited

expenses, and the Salvation Army does not charge rent from them. Therefore, funds from Good Seed are used to buy trays and farming tools and subsidise volunteers, while his regular work income is used to buy soil and fertilisers. Although he runs the business alone, he tries hard to find ways to sustain it. One way is to maintain his original job while tending to the farm. He has switched from his full-time job at the hospital to a part-time job that only requires him to work two-thirds of his previous hours. This allows him to tend to his farm at the Salvation Army at least two days a week. “The hospital job is my fallback. Private hospitals have short working hours, so I still have energy to do what I like after work. This can sustain my business for longer, since I won’t easily give up for fear of not earning enough money from farming. I can take my time and do a better job when no one is giving me pressure.”

FROM AN ENCLOSED ROOM TO WORKING UNDER THE SUN

In Hong Kong, more and more people are engaged in farming, but very few of them are full-time farmers. In the 1990s, Naoki Shiomi proposed the concept of “half-farmer, half-X” to address various development problems in the city. He defined a “farmer” as “a person who lives a simple life in accordance with the course of nature, being self-sufficient through small-scale agriculture practices and satisfying basic needs with a simple lifestyle”; “X” is not just any job, but a career and a vision, and using one’s talents to create a positive connection with society and bring happiness to the public.

In Hong Kong, there is a group of “half-farmer, half-X” or “half-farmer, half-other worker”. William positions himself not as a self-sufficient farmer, but someone who uses farming as a medium to serve the community. Rather than living a “half-farmer, half-other worker” life, William has more of a “side-gig lifestyle”, developing his personal interests and career after work.

William found someone on a social media platform who was following a similar path — he was also an X-ray technician who ran a farm at the same time. They got in touch, and William would help out on his farm from time to time. “His farm is very different from urban farming. We exchange ideas.”

William did not know much about farming before, but as he continued to try and explore, he became more interested in it. He has taken five or six courses on cultivation, guided gardening, and horticultural therapy:

“It’s amazing and challenging to grow a huge plant from a seed.”

But he has never thought about running a farm like his counterpart. Farmers live a hard life working outdoors under the bright sun and extreme weather, investing everything into farming. His vision is different; he has always preferred green or agricultural activities that are community-based and related to helping the disadvantaged.

Smooth as his life path has been, it has been a challenge to move from the comfort zone of working in an enclosed space to working outdoors under the sun, not to mention embracing uncertainty. He said that farming is facing countless uncontrollable conditions, the ever-changing climate, and long waits, for everything in nature has its own rhythm and pace. With his endeavour in farming, he is slowly opening his own path of social entrepreneurship. He will not give up his original vision, holding tight onto the hope of achieving it one day.

