



## A WAY OUT OF THE STRUCTURE

Cathy also understands the pressure which schools face. Before she became a social worker, she taught at a school. Every day, she was already exhausted after finishing basic tasks like preparing for lessons, correcting homework, and having meetings. It was difficult for her to find time to care about the students' emotions. "Teachers meet with students every day. Compared to social workers, teachers have much more influence on them, but teachers are also under great pressure in the system. Society emphasises a lot on inter-professional collaboration, but how can we work well together when every profession is restricted by the system?"

In order to break through the structure, Cathy has been in contact with social workers, clinical psychologists, and other professionals in various fields, hoping to provide aftercare counselling alongside launching the storybooks — she hopes to free the children from their problems.

**"I believe many people care about the next generation. Even if it only influences one life, we must keep going."**

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THE SECOND BOX –  
WU WAI HO

THE  
DESTINATION  
IS THE START —  
AN 18-MONTH  
“FAILED” LESSON

## LABOUR ONLY WORTH \$60

The story of “The Second Box” started when four guys moved out from their university hall. In the summer of 2014, Wu Wai Ho wanted to buy a few cardboard boxes from a chain homeware store to move back home from his university hall, and he was astonished to find that a cardboard box costed \$20. So instead, he bought one from an elderly scavenger for just \$5. This prompts the question: Why is a cardboard box in the hands of the scavenger worth so much less than one sold at a homeware store? Why is the labour of the elderly worth less? These questions lingered in Wu’s mind and inspired him to establish The Second Box with three of his friends in November 2015. Since then, they had tried collecting cardboard with elderly scavengers on the street; six to seven hours of labour only got them \$60 in return. “When we collected cardboard with elderly scavengers, we found out that their motivation was to gain extra income with their own hands. What I found the most heartbreaking was what they got in return was not proportionate to their work, and society had never addressed the problem,” Wu said.

After coming up with the idea, Wu’s team planned to purchase cardboard boxes from scavengers at a higher-than-market price and resell them to various retail stores. Due to its high stock turnover rate, “Dried Seafood Street” was the first target of The Second Box.

**“We found out that there were competitors in second-hand cardboard box trading, so we began to brainstorm on offering extra value or services to attract customers.”**

Wu explained that to raise their competitiveness, they would find out about the needs of different stores and provide cardboard boxes of different sizes to cater for the products.



**“ Starting a social enterprise is like studying a subject. It is also like falling in love. In the honeymoon period, you grow and bravely rise up to challenges; when you reach a more stable period and start to plan for the future, you may face a bottleneck. Some can grit their teeth and trudge on, while others may get stuck in the mud. “The Second Box” was the latter one, as the founder Wu Wai Ho admitted that the project had to come to an end due to a lack of development opportunities. Despite so, the team’s invaluable experience will become fertiliser for nurturing new hope.**

## FACING A BOTTLENECK AFTER HALF A YEAR

During the interview, Wu often explained the operations of The Second Box with sales or marketing theories — it had a lot to do with his academic background in marketing. With his solid academic background and socially meaningful idea, he seemed to be heading towards success. Nevertheless, reality is often unpredictable. In the first half a year, they already had a remarkable monthly sale of a hundred thousand cardboard boxes and a revenue which increased every quarter; however, Wu admitted that they were already facing a bottleneck at the peak. “After three months of exploration, we had located our first batch of customers; after six months, we already knew precisely what types and sizes of cardboard boxes the customers needed. We could also serve customers all over Hong Kong. But how much did we make? Only enough to pay our monthly salary.”

To increase the scale of a business, most entrepreneurs carry out business expansion. However, when the team sought more funding, the operations of

The Second Box was criticised by the business sector.

**“Our operations involved a vulnerable social group, which limited our manpower. Therefore, we were accused of using a large cost to generate similar value instead of using the least resources to generate the maximum productivity,”**

Wu said quietly. The path towards expansion was grim, but so was remaining in status quo. The more selling sites they opened, the more cardboard boxes they needed, and they had to ensure that both the quantity and the quality were up to standard. However, the number of cardboard boxes collected by the elderly scavengers varied every day, so The Second Box collected cardboard from other sources too. “But this deviated from our initial intention because it meant we could not help as many elderly scavengers,” Wu explained.

## INITIAL INTENTION VS NUMBERS

Facing the bottleneck, The Second Box had once launched a festive product as an attempt to explore new sales options — Christmas cards made of cardboard boxes. Since the Christmas cards sold well, one member suggested making it a long-term direction of development; however, Wu felt uncertain about its feasibility, which led to a lot of conflicts in the team.

**“As a limited-time sale, it was great, but my focus was how well it penetrated the market and the value it could bring to the customers. I became rational and started running The Second Box as a business because after all, it was still these numbers, the performance index, that would keep the project going,”**

Wu confessed.

Unfortunately, the numbers never met the team’s expectations. As the business had little room for development and the team was unwilling to give up on their initial intention, Wu and the other members

decided to terminate The Second Box after two years of operation. Recalling the journey, Wu reflected on how to balance between social values and gaining profits. “The greatest limitation was the aim of the company. We wanted to help the elderly, and we still do, but we focused too much on this and forgot that businesses earn money by solving problems for customers. Now, I admire social enterprise restaurants, because they directly provide for customers’ needs while hiring the elderly. If I was to set up another social enterprise, my prime consideration would be catering for the customer group,” Wu said calmly.

## EXPERIENCE BECOMES NUTRIENTS

The Second Box was the hard work of Wu and his three friends after all, so this result was upsetting. “Of course I felt sad, but it made me reflect on what the problem was. I think I should have handled it more rationally.” But Wu kept analysing business theories and marketing strategies during the interview — why did he think that he was not rational enough? “This was forced out of me. At the start, I was completely driven by emotions and forgot about the numbers,” Wu smiled. The numbers were important, but they were built on the hardship and labour of the elderly scavengers. Then, was the forced termination of the project hard to explain to the scavengers? “Not at all. Actually, they’ve known all along and were always worried about how long we could keep going. They had experience in the trade, so they knew the normal prices. Moreover, they had experienced a lot and seen many people come and go,” Wu said with a small smile.

The Second Box stopped operations last year. Wu has a full-time job now,

but he has not given up on his dream of setting up a social enterprise or a start-up company whenever opportunity arises. “Being back at a workplace, I have more free time to explore other industries as well as local and international public policies. One day, I hope to do more for the elderly scavengers.”

