

YOUTH

Diet that does not waste

Freegans adopt a minimalist lifestyle to help protect the health of the environment, **Wang Qian** reports.

Co-pioneers are treading a new path to limit their environmental footprint, and more are expected to join them on this route as waste management becomes ever more relevant. World Bank data shows that an average city dweller is responsible for dumping more than 270 kilograms of solid waste each year, about 0.74 kg each day.

But Ding Hong is counteracting this by adopting a lifestyle, in which such wastage is almost nonexistent — her solid waste barely fills an empty coffee can following her “one-year zero waste challenge”, which she began in July last year.

Now an illustrator and animator at Maui Studios Aotearoa, an animation and game company in New Zealand, the 39-year-old is a committed “freegan”, who rejects consumerism and seeks to help save the environment by reducing waste.

“My experiment made me realize that it is not necessary for humans to generate so much plastic waste, which is not biodegradable,” Ding says.

To minimize her waste, she has quit instant noodles and barely shops online, to reduce her use of packaging materials. Every aspect of her life, even the most intimate, is governed by the philosophy of waste reduction. For instance, she uses a menstrual cup, which with due care can last for years.

For Ding, the concept helps her to live a different life, a life of less but one with more freedom and experiences.

“Freegans are not beggars. Many of them can afford to live another life,” Ding explains.

She spends 2,100 yuan (\$319) a month on rent for her shared flat in Christchurch and almost everything she owns has been salvaged or handmade.

Apart from spending less than 15 yuan on a cabbage and a leek in 2016 the week she arrived in New Zealand, she hasn't spent a penny on vegetables or fruit. After she researched and consulted with local people about what is edible and what is not, she forages in the nearby woods, collecting plants to cook at home.

She also grows vegetables and tomatoes in her backyard, and makes compost at home using food scraps and yard waste. She even makes wine at home.

She goes fishing at the beach as well. “Following the tide and current, I know when it is a good time for fishing,” Ding says and smiles.

Her goal, she says, is that one day she can live a totally self-sufficient lifestyle with no requirement for money.

Although freeganism is still a new concept in China and official figures are hard to come by, the idea of reducing waste has been welcomed by environmentalists and governments.

In an August speech announcing the “Clean Plate 2.0” campaign, President Xi Jinping emphasized thriftiness and China's commitment to drastically reducing food wastage.

“My experiment made me realize that it is not necessary for humans to generate so much plastic waste, which is not biodegradable.”

Ding Hong, 39, an illustrator and animator now based in New Zealand, who follows a minimalist lifestyle

Back in 2013, Xi raised the issue in public and highlighted the importance of food wastage reduction, resulting in the first “Clean Your Plate” campaign.

Last year, Shanghai took the lead in enhancing public awareness about environmental protection by introducing garbage classification at home, followed by Beijing and many other cities this year. By next year most of the Chinese cities are expected to introduce garbage classification.

Ding's unique lifestyle made headlines domestically and went viral on micro-blogging platform Sina Weibo. Many online have expressed their appreciation of the concept, and began to critically think about many issues themselves, such as the true cost of the convenience they've been enjoying through food deliveries and online shopping. An internet user called Liang Yi comments: “We cannot change the world, but we can change ourselves.”

There are also many doubts and disagreements among users. For example, when they learned that Ding often asks her colleagues for their leftovers for her lunch, some questions about hygiene were raised.

Others aired safety concerns when they learned that, while traveling, Ding chooses to engage in “couch surfing” — sleeping on a couch for short stays in the homes of people she barely knows.

Ding welcomes all the comments and feedback. “I love to get any reaction from people, agreeing or disagreeing. My lifestyle has triggered some discussions and led some people reflect on their own lives,” Ding says.

A life-changing trip

Born to a modest family in a small town of Southwest China's Guizhou province, Ding found a passion for painting at a young age. After graduation with an associate degree in animation from the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute in 2002, she worked as a comic strip artist in Shanghai. Later, however, in her 20s, her career hit a bottleneck, and she succumbed to depression.

To find a way out, she drafted her “bucket list”, filling an A4-sized sheet of paper. Ding quit her job and discarded many of her material possessions. With just a 15-kilogram



Clockwise from top: Ding Hong, who lives a minimalist life, picks wild fruits in the woods near her rented home in Christchurch, New Zealand. Her solid waste barely fills an empty coffee can after she carried out a “one-year zero waste challenge” from July last year. Ding cuts and gathers some seaweed as food from the ocean.

PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

backpack and a bank card with 100,000 yuan at her disposal, she embarked on an overseas trip.

Naturally for an art major her first destination was Europe, with Italy being her first stop.

She met a very hospitable and caring woman in her 60s who runs a homestay in Rome, where Ding stayed for a few nights.

“Each evening, I returned to the

homestay like a tired dog and fell asleep in an instant, but the next morning, I was surprised to find my pair of socks and my underwear washed and dried — the old lady helped me to clean them, saying that I needed to do more important things,” Ding recalls. “At that very moment I felt so touched and had this revelation: I was cared about and my life was cherished. There's

Tips for a frugal form of existence

According to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, freegan, a portmanteau of the words “free” and “vegan”, refers to an activist who scavenges for free food as a means of reducing consumption of resources. Cambridge online dictionary defines it as “a person who chooses to eat food that is not bought from a shop, especially food that other people, shops or organizations throw away, so that food is not wasted”. The word was first seen in print in 1997 and added to the dictionary in 2014.

Ding Hong began her freegan lifestyle in 2009 with the belief that “the less you rely on material, the more freedom you will have”.

If you are interested in the principles of the freegan lifestyle, the following are three practices that Ding abides by.

The first pertains to food. To avoid food waste, Ding uses leftover food packed by her friends and colleagues. For freegans who let the people around them know about their lifestyle choice, there will be more than enough food given to them before it is thrown away.

Then comes the clothes. Many people have closets full of clothes they seldom wear. Instead of tossing out items that are damaged or used, freegans emphasize the importance of mending clothing and fixing items in their possession.

Ding wears secondhand clothing that she obtains from her friends, and sometimes she donates excess clothes to help more people. She has also started getting creative with designing her own wardrobe. Recycling old clothes and customizing them into something new gives her a sense of satisfaction.

Finally, housing. Different from food and clothing, a home is not something that you can recycle.

For Ding, jobs often come with a place to stay. While traveling, she uses networks — such as couch surfing websites and apps — to stay for short periods in other people's homes.

—WANG QIAN

no reason I should waste it.”

After the one-month trip, her depression lifted, and she found another change in herself. “I desired little in the way of material possessions,” Ding says.

For six years starting in 2009, Ding did not spend a penny on housing. When she worked as a game artist for Kingsoft in Beijing from 2008 to 2010, she lived in the office. With a canteen and bathroom, it was a simple life, but Ding was happy.

As she continued to accumulate money, Ding spent it on delicious food and travel. In 2012, she and a friend toured Southeast Asia, visiting

five countries. She learned open-water diving in Semporna, Malaysia, and this gave her a precious insight into nature. “When diving to a depth of 40 meters, I realized how small we humans are,” she recalls, adding that a life should not be merely judged by the accumulation of material things, money and property.

Anchor Lee, a colleague of Ding, comments online on her LinkedIn profile: “To many women her age, the dream of traveling around the world is just a dream, but Mantis (Ding's English name) has already done it, step by step. This is rare; it also explains her temperament: brave and tough.”

A proactive solution

In 2017, Ding went to study animation further at the Southern Institute of Technology in New Zealand, which she considers to be the best way to spend her accumulated money without adding any weight to her backpack.

While studying there, her 3D animation project, *The Mad Taxi Driver*, won the SIT Weta Digital Award for Outstanding Animation issued by the school.

She has shared her life on social media platforms, such as Tianya forum, Sina Weibo and WeChat. Her story has been reported in the media, through which many people began to learn about freeganism.

Originating in the United States, freeganism was a response to the massive amounts of food that rich countries were discarding in the late 1990s. Freegans object to the over-consumption and environmental degradation on which they claim our economic order depends, and they register that dissent by opting out of it, recovering, redistributing, and consuming wasted goods, from discarded food to castoff clothes and furniture.

Their code is set out in *Freegans: Diving Into the Wealth of Food Waste in America* published in 2016 by Alex Barnard, who wrote the book based on years of fieldwork and in-depth interviews with freegans in New York. He's now an assistant professor of sociology at New York University.

A 2013 report from the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization points out that the global volume of food wastage annually is estimated at 1.6 billion metric tons of “primary product equivalents” and the total food wastage for the edible part of this amounts to 1.3 billion metric tons.

Ding's icon, the late Heidemarie Schwermer, a German woman who hasn't spent any money since 1996, says in the documentary *Living Without Money*: “For some people I'm a provocation. But for others, I'm an answer”.

For Ding, freeganism is her answer.

“When you give up something, you will receive something unexpected in return,” Ding says.

Contact the writer at wangqian@chinadaily.com.cn

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