

STYLE

W E D N E S D A Y , A U G U S T 2 6 , 2 0 0 9

13



”

Fair trade vendors need to be transparent and they need to be able to tell people exactly how their items are made and how their workers are treated.

— Lydia Wang, owner of Earth Tree



Style with a conscience

Earth Tree near Yongkang Park specializes in fair trade clothing and accessories

BY CATHERINE SHU
STAFF REPORTER

Since opening Earth Tree (地球樹) in 2006, Lydia Wang (王端宜) has dedicated her career to convincing shoppers that fair trade items can be just as fashionable as they are socially responsible.

But before then, Wang's own understanding of fair trade was limited. "I knew about fair trade goods, but I thought they were just coffee, tea and chocolate. I'd never heard of things like fair trade purses or fair trade dresses," says Wang. Then she had a conversation with a friend who was decked out in an array of clothing and jewelry from People Tree and Nepali Bazar, two Japanese brands that carry items by craftspeople and other workers from Asian and African countries.

Her curiosity piqued, Wang saw a market niche in Taiwan and soon afterwards opened Earth Tree on a picturesque stretch off Xincheng South Road (新生南路) near Yongkang Park (永康公園). The store's specialty is the kind of fair trade style that Wang first saw on her friend, including T-shirts, tunics, hand-knit shawls and scarves, handbags and beaded jewelry from countries such as India, Kenya, Thailand and Bangladesh. Home accessories, organic cocoa, coffee beans and dried fruit are also available, and gifts can be wrapped with colorful, handspun hemp twine and sent with one-of-a-kind greeting cards, which are also sold at Earth Tree.

Most of Earth Tree's items are from People Tree and Nepali Bazar, two well-established brands that are both certified by the World Fair Trade Organization, a group that promotes fair trade and sets trading standards. According to the WFTO, the tenets of fair trade include creating opportunities for economically disadvantaged workers and communities, maintaining equitable business practices, paying a living wage to producers and providing safe working conditions.

In addition to the two Japanese brands, Wang also sources products from smaller and newer groups, even if they have yet to earn WFTO certification. Before the products are sold in Earth Tree, Wang does her own due diligence to ensure that they meet fair trade standards. She travels to Japan regularly to attend fair trade conferences, where she keeps an eye out for vendors who are able to provide comprehensive reports on their manufacturing and labor practices, or who have business relationships with established fair trade brands.

"Fair trade vendors need to be transparent and they need to be able to tell people exactly how their items are made and how their workers are treated," says Wang.

Companies that are WFTO certified are also required to use environmentally friendly manufacturing practices.

Earth Tree stocks organic cotton tank tops (NT\$980) from People Tree. Each step in the manufacturing and distribution process, from

the planting of the seeds to the dyeing of the fiber to the shipment of the finished goods, is calibrated to leave as small a footprint on the Earth as possible. The tanks, available in basic silhouettes and bright colors, are also certified by the UK's Soil Association, which supports organic farming.

But fair trade goes beyond sustainable environmental practices. "Another important aspect is developing long-term partnerships between organizations and workers, as well as contributing to their communities," says Wang. Shoppers familiar with fair trade products are likely to see the same names year after year, including Kenyan jewelry maker Bombolulu Workshop, silversmiths ThaiCraft and Indian studio Silence. Earth Tree currently carries a series of candles by the latter inspired by endangered species (NT\$350 each) and handmade by the studio's artisans, who are deaf.

Wang says it's not just workers or the environment that enjoy the benefits of fair trade. "Shoppers have the peace-of-mind of knowing that when they spend money on something, they aren't helping to support a company that treats its workers poorly," says Wang. "It might not be something that people focus on all the time when they go shopping, but I think most consumers would be unhappy if they knew the cup of coffee they were drinking had been produced by someone who was being treated poorly."

Wang says consumer awareness of fair trade products has increased since she opened her store three years ago, thanks in part to the ongoing trend toward green and eco-friendly products. The economic downturn, however, has had an impact on Earth Tree's business; even customers with a socially responsible bent have to go bargain hunting. But while fair trade items have a reputation for being more expensive than their conventionally produced counterparts, the lower cost of living in many of the areas where workers live means that prices are still reasonable. A hand-tooled structured leather satchel from India, for example, is NT\$1,880. A dress made with recycled cotton and trimmed with contrasting stitching is NT\$2,980, while hand-hammered brass earrings from Kenya are NT\$990.

"If something is completely handmade and embroidered, it's really hard to compare its price with a similar item that's made by machine," says Wang.

STORE NOTES:

WHAT: Earth Tree (地球樹)
WHERE: 35-1, Ln 30, Xincheng S Rd Sec 2, Taipei City (台北市新生南路二段30巷35-1號)
HOURS: Daily from noon to 10pm
TELEPHONE: (02) 2394-9959
ON THE NET: www.earthtree.com.tw



Earth Tree stocks T-shirts, tunics, hand-knit shawls and scarves, handbags and beaded jewelry from countries such as India, Kenya, Thailand and Bangladesh, as well as home accessories, organic cocoa, coffee beans and dried fruit.

PHOTOS: CATHERINE SHU, TAIPEI TIMES

