

Women and Sustainability:

Taking a Lead in China

By Wayne Visser

A few years ago, on one of my visits to China, I was invited to speak to a group in Shanghai called [Women in Sustainability Action](#) (Wisa). The organisation was set up by a former academic colleague, Jaclyn Shi, as a global network of professional women working in sustainability. This got me thinking about the relationship between women and sustainability – and especially how this dynamic is playing out in China.

According to professor Kellie McElhane, founder of the Centre for Responsible Business at University of California, Berkeley's Haas School of Business, companies that empower women are more likely to be companies that act sustainably.

[A research paper written by McElhane and Sanaz Mobasser](#) found that businesses with more women on their board of directors are more likely to: manage and improve their energy efficiency; measure and reduce their carbon emissions; reduce their packaging impacts; invest in renewable power; improve access to healthcare in developing countries; have strong partnerships with local communities; offer products with nutritional or health benefits; proactively manage human capital development; offer transparent financial products; have anti-corruption policies and programmes; have a high level of disclosure and transparency; and avoid controversies such as accounting fraud, price fixing, criminal behaviour among top executives, controversial customer practices and insider trading.

But why is this? It's a topic for hot debate and there are probably as many opinions as there are commentators. Do men have inherently unsustainable ways of acting in the world? Does testosterone fuel the exploitation of our planet and its people? Are women our best hope for creating a sustainable future?

Elle Carberry, co-founder and managing director of the [China Greentech Initiative](#) believes that women may be drawn to sustainability because of its social angle. "From all my 20 years in business, I have met more women in this area than in others [areas of business]," she says. "Be it in China or the United States."

She adds: "It does strike me that women come to this with a view about society and business. In China, women also appear to be playing an increasingly important role in sustainability and for one Chinese woman in particular, this "view about society and business" turned her into the wealthiest self-made woman in the world. Zhang Yin, also known by her Cantonese name Cheung Yan, is the founder and director of Nine Dragons Paper, a recycling company that buys scrap paper from the US, imports it into China, and turns it mainly into cardboard for use in boxes to export Chinese goods.

In 2006, she topped the list of the richest people in China and by 2010 her \$4.6bn (£2.9bn) fortune placed her ahead of the likes of Oprah Winfrey and JK Rowling. She has said that she built her entire business empire on some simple advice that she received in Hong Kong in 1985: "Waste paper is like a forest – paper recycles itself, generation after generation."

Peggy Liu, co-founder of the Joint US-China Collaboration on Clean Energy (Jucce), [is working to create a China Dream concept to divert China](#) away from a mass consumerist path and is targeting high-level officials to spread her message and give foreign companies and experts access to China's decision makers.

Carberry believes that "the markets associated with China going green might be some of the biggest markets ever." She approached the head of General Electric (GE) in China in 2008 and asked if he would support a knowledge sharing platform and network to help accelerate the scaling of clean technology.

"He jumped at the idea immediately," she recalls. "And when I asked him why he was so keen, he said, 'in China the opportunity is too big, the problem is too urgent and China is too complex. We can't do it alone. We all – GE, Dow, Bayer and others – see a piece of it, but none of us see how the whole thing comes together'". And so the China Greentech Initiative was born.

Today, the platform pulls together information on cleantech, checks and analyses that data and brings together a network of interested companies, policy makers and organisations to identify opportunities. It certainly seems to be working. According to the 2012 Ernst & Young ranking of country attractiveness for renewable energy investments, China leads the world, ahead of the US and Germany.

Yin and Carberry are just two of many such pioneering women taking on sustainable business in China. Others, to name but a few, include Jin JiaMan, director of the Global Environmental Institute, Chen Zhili, chair of the China Women's Federation, Li Chun Mei, founder and general manager of Wealth Environment Engineering Co, and Anne Myong, chief operating officer of Walmart, who realised the lack of [leadership](#) on CSR and is now devising a clearer strategy.

However, Kaying Lau, country director for the [Global Reporting Initiative in China](#), says despite these role models, millions of women are still under-represented. But with more high-profile role models, the hope is that more will be empowered to join the sustainability revolution.

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