

'Tis the season to be ... sustainable

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Academics and activists give their advice for reducing consumption during the festive period

Last December, shoppers in bustling Causeway Bay were treated to an unusual sight: a small group of Greenpeace activists scaled the giant screen outside Times Square to hang a banner which read "Buy Smart Buy Less".

But the timely reminder to break the never-ending cycle of overconsumption did little to change the predominant consumer culture. For many Hongkongers, reducing consumption is the last thing on their minds during what is, after all, the season of excess.

Wasteful materialism is not a new phenomenon in Hong Kong or other rich, urbanised parts of the world, but a growing chorus of experts and campaigners are now putting forward alternatives for celebrating the festive period in a more sustainable way.

"Festive seasons are often a disaster for waste because of all the increased consumption," says Dr Daisy Tam of Hong Kong Baptist University, who studies ethical food practices in Hong Kong.

[Hongkongers' shopping habits among unhealthiest in the world, survey reveals](#) [1]

"Food waste is something we're all familiar with, but not enough is being done to tackle the issue."

Tam cites the familiar statistic of 36,000 tonnes of food from Hong Kong being thrown into landfills every day, but bemoans the lack of detailed data on the issue which would give more clues to the true environmental cost of festive overconsumption.



While she agrees that food waste is becoming more discussed in recent years, she claims there is still a long way to go before consumers shift their behaviours and attitudes completely.

“Planning is the key to changing our behaviours in the long run,” she says, advising shoppers to avoid over-buying and to plan recipes for leftovers as two easy initial steps they could take.

But reducing consumption is not down to individuals alone, and Tam claims that restaurants and shops could take more responsibility for the issue by managing their stocks better, for instance.

“For restaurants, a lot of waste comes from people who don’t show up,” she says. “I think it’s good practice to get customers to order in advance, and put a deposit down so the restaurant can have a good idea of how much food they should prepare.”



Thousands of tonnes of food is thrown away each day in Hong Kong . Photo: Edward Wong

As a result of the public's increased awareness of food waste, several food banks and food waste NGOs that rely on donations of surplus food have been flourishing in Hong Kong. These include Feeding Hong Kong, Food Angel and Foodlink Foundation.

Tam cautions that, ideally, donating food to charity should not be a justification for further overspending and overconsumption.

“For example, mooncakes are often donated after Mid-Autumn Festival but they are also very rich and heavy, so not necessarily suited to everyone,” she says. “For Christmas, if you or a shop wants to donate turkey, make sure the NGOs have the capacity to then cook it or redistribute it.”

She advises people to donate surplus food as early as possible to charities, so that it gives them enough time to collect and distribute it to the needy.

[Affluent Chinese ditching consumerism for the simple life](#) [2]

“Often people donate at the very last minute when it becomes on the cusp of turning bad.”

As for Christmas presents, zero waste entrepreneur Fanny Moritz has a simple solution. In a city where only 2 per cent of waste is recycled, the CEO and founder of NO!W No Waste , an online store selling reusable eco-friendly products, claims that the key is to consume less in the first place.

“For gifts, focus on what you can personally do. Instead of buying a box of chocolates, create something from your own hands,” she says.

“Instead of offering physical objects as gifts, offer an experience – that is so much better, and people remember it.”

The French expat was originally inspired to pursue the zero waste lifestyle by Bea Johnson, author of *Zero Waste Home* and the movement's original pioneer, who managed to fit her family of four's yearly domestic waste into a half-litre jar.



Fanny Moritz, CEO and founder of NO!W No Waste. Photo: Winson Wong

She claims it is gaining popularity globally since people love the visual aspect of the challenge, care about the planet and wish to save money.

Of the reusable products on offer in her online store, Moritz recommends the reusable gift wrap, which was inspired by the Japanese tradition of using furoshiki – a brightly patterned cloth for wrapping presents and bento boxes.

Moritz also mentions the bamboo toothbrushes, reusable coffee filters, menstrual cups and washable facial cleansing wipes as good gift suggestions for those wishing to reduce their waste.

Another meaningful gift idea that is often overlooked in Hong Kong is giving the gift of time through volunteering at one of the city's various charities.

Fewer than a third of Hongkongers undertook any volunteering in the last year, according to a recent poll of 1,000 people conducted by local NGO HandsOn Hong Kong and data research company Nielsen. However, 70 per cent of those surveyed claimed that they wished to take part in volunteering activities.

"There's a disconnect between people's appetite for volunteering and their belief that it's a good thing to do," says Catherine Dannaoui, head of communications at HandsOn Hong Kong. "The number one barrier people have is time."

The need to give back to the community is especially heightened at Christmas due to people's gratitude towards their family and friends, according to Dannaoui.



Hong Kong is known for its appetite for consumerism. Photo: Nora Tam

“When we look at others around us, maybe refugees seeking asylum or isolated elderly people, we feel an even greater sense of empathy and want to connect with those that need more support.”

As part of their Christmas volunteering programme, the charity has organised a festive buffet for children with mental and physical disabilities at a plush hotel. Volunteers will accompany the children and help serve food, as well as hand out presents dressed as Santa Claus. Dannaoui claims that for many of the kids, this will be the only chance they get all year to celebrate in that manner.

“You will absolutely get so much more out of volunteering than you could possibly put in,” she says. “Multiple studies have shown that it releases endorphins and can be good for our mental health. It can even reduce loneliness and isolation in the volunteer, so there’s almost no better time to get started.”

For Matt Au, who works in banking, volunteering during the festive season is “especially meaningful” and provides a welcome sense of balance to the stresses of his personal and professional life.

“Interacting with those who are less fortunate gives me perspective and serves as a reminder of how truly blessed I am,” he says of his plans to help out at the upcoming Christmas buffet on December 28.

“So ‘sacrificing’ a few hours of our own time, taking a break from our enjoyment of lavish food and drinks and presents, to bring some joy to those who cannot quite afford it – to me that is most satisfying.”

Topics: City Weekend

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